

Political Theatre and the Experience Economy

by

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A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of MA by
Research



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Department of Drama and Theatre Arts
University of Birmingham
Submitted 2017

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Abstract

This investigation will be seeking contemporary insight into a binary conundrum that has perplexed the theatre academe for decades. Can political theatre accurately critique capitalism whilst being a product of it? Using contemporary political theatre surrounding the 2015 UK general election, I will focus on three case studies which exemplify varying illustrations of 'success' under the idealised agenda of political theatre; that of political emancipation. These pieces may be proven to align with the traditions of the avant-garde, and act as contemporary instances. However, all three theatrical performances share a distinct commonality, that which harnesses modes of participation in their work, inducing differing forms of experience. This thesis will pose insight into whether such examples of political theatre are products of a proliferating experience economy, or have the potential to usurp an economic framework and accurately critique global capitalism. I will evidence the differing ways in which the 'system' can be understood, perhaps undermining the notion that the system of capitalism is impenetrable. Finally, I will traverse the problematic notion of finding strategies through which experience can potentially be utilised for the benefit of political theatre's emancipatory ambitions.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to a number of people without whom I would have been unable to complete such a project. A special feeling of gratitude goes to my parents, who have been consistently there for me throughout, guiding, caring and encouraging me to achieve everything I possibly can.

Secondly, my thanks go to Michael and Paula Challis, who have supported me throughout this time. Your support, in ways too numerous to list, will always be appreciated. Further, my thanks to Natalie. You continually pushed me, supported me and cared for me.

Finally, if Shakespeare is right that tears can water growth then I hope the ones I lost for you will hold me steady as I continue to grow. Rest in peace.

Acknowledgements

This MA thesis has enabled me to further my skills in critical analysis and has taught me invaluable skills in working independently. Whilst a challenging process, which at times could feel insular and solitary, remaining confident that the work had value enabled me to keep going.

Alongside my family and friends, I wish to acknowledge a set of individuals who have helped me throughout this process. My unending gratitude goes to Dr Vicky Angelaki, Dr Liz Tomlin, Dr Adam Alston, Dr Patricia McTighe and Yassen Vasilev. Not only have these individuals read drafts, provided materials, made suggestions, challenged ideas and guided me technically, they have also taken the time to talk, disagree and push me to create a stronger thesis.

Finally, I accept responsibility for the ideas presented in this work. I have respectfully credited the thoughts of others through a meticulous and sound referencing process.

Table of Contents

1) Political Theatre	p.1
2) More than a commodity?	p.29
3) Who Cares	p.53
- 'The system decides'	p.70
- The problem with the artistic 'spin-doctor'	p.75
- <i>Who Cares</i> ; about Political Theatre's future	p.82
4) Fight Night	p.89
- The power of participation, pessimism and potential	p.104
- The politics and economics of experience	p.112
- The micro-utopian political project	p.119
5) Early Days (of a better nation)	p.128
- Just a game?	p.139
- The system decides that you decide the system	p.146
- Spinning social change	p.158
- Process > Result	p.169
- Early days of a better theatre	p.172

6) Conclusion

p.177

7) References

8) Bibliography

POLITICAL THEATRE

‘The more time we are living through the harder it has been for the theatre, which in the past was often looked upon as ‘the’ political art, to find its footing... yet there exists again... a strong desire for political theatre. A theatre that finds not only access to important social issues, but is itself a political space and public sphere’

(Florian Malzacher, *Unrest and Discontent – Political Theatre as*

Agonistic Field (n.d),

<<https://www.goethe.de/en/kul/tut/gen/tup/20776967.html>> [accessed

17 May 2016])

The 2015 UK general election was a cornerstone moment in my life. It was the first election I had had a direct involvement with, more than just crossing the necessary box, the one I cared most about, and ultimately the one in which my vote counted for nothing. Not only did this political moment instil in me a personal sense of activism, it also forced me to assess nuances I had previously taken for granted in the vast political landscape. Importantly, the

2015 UK general election frames this analysis, as it has done with my academic and political endeavours since. The framework for this thesis finds its genesis in two areas: politics and participation. The UK general election is quite obviously political, by its very nature. However, it is also participatory. For anything to happen, it requires us, citizens of a functioning democracy, to involve ourselves in the practical and participatory process of voting. This investigation will be anchored around these two key areas; contemporary theatre will be the lens through which such analysis can be performed. Ultimately, I will show how/if a piece of contemporary piece of theatre can be both political and participatory whilst acting as an agent for critique. I will evidence elements that locate the work as political, alongside tangible physical functions that are participatory. Following this identification, I will analyse how both of these coinciding features fit within the claims that political theatre can, if not at least gesture towards change. Elements of this thesis will suggest that the specific use of participation in performance can operate as an agent of political critique as well as concurrently representing a reflection of consumerist participation due to its position in an economic framework. Finally, I will question what the resulting effects demonstrate and contribute to academic discourse.

My chosen case studies are *Who Cares* by Michael Wynne (10 Apr – 16 May 2015, Jerwood Theatre Upstairs), *Fight Night* by Ontroerend Goed (16 May – 30 May 2015, Unicorn Theatre), and *Early Days (of a better nation)* by Coney (Oct 2014 – May 2015, various locations on tour, 12 May –

15 May 2015 - Warwick Arts Centre). All three examples resonate with the 2015 general election as they focus on the issues one would immediately associate with the debate and furore such an event generates. The privatisation of the NHS, nationalism, identity, racism, voting, democracy, spin, mendacity, political persona, policy and strategy are just a few examples. For a more detailed statistical analysis on key issues, see the data provided by Ipsos Mori.¹ Furthermore, the three selected case studies in this investigation were performed to a UK audience just before the general election, when the political temperature was at fever pitch. This was reflected on theatrical stages across the country, and especially in London, arguably the centre of UK theatre and politics respectively. Examples of this include James Graham's *The Vote* (24th April – 7th May 2015, Donmar Warehouse), Theatre Delicatessen's *The Candidate* (29th April – 16th May, Instillation Room 2, London, 2015) and Anders Lustgarten *Lampedusa* (30th June – 25th July 2015, Soho Theatre) along with a wealth of others too numerous to list, but selectively done so in various online sources.² Of course, the theatre is a long time purveyor and often provocateur of public opinion, a claim that will be evidenced when looking specifically into the workings of the particular field of political theatre.

¹ Ipsos Mori, *Economy, immigration and healthcare are Britons' top three issues deciding general election vote* (2014), <<https://www.ipsosmori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3447/Economy-immigration-and-healthcare-are-Britons-top-three-issues-deciding-general-election-vote.aspx>> [accessed 12 November 2015].

² BBC News, *Can pre-election theatre offer a fresh view of politics?* (2015) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-32251682>> [accessed 14 October 2015].

The term political theatre goes back to the very beginnings of theatre as a public form of art and democratic gathering. This being said, in academic discourse John McGrath's work³ remains important in this area of analysis, other important practitioners will be referenced throughout. I present his thoughts first as he adds a contemporary framework to this paper with regards to logic and definitions and aimed to show how the stage could be used as an instrument for political messages. McGrath's text shows how theatre can act as an agent of critique. Theatre can not only pressure towards, but in fact can seek to cause social change. Perhaps more helpful, and a quote that will become more prevalent towards the end of this thesis, is McGrath's suggestion that a political theatre can

be a public emblem of inner, and outer, events, and occasionally a reminder, an elbow-jogger, a perspective-bringer. Above all, it can be the way people can find their voice, their solidarity and their collective determination.⁴

³ John McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form* (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd, 1981).

⁴ McGrath, *A Good Night Out*, p. xxvii.

My chosen case studies may exemplify, to varying degrees, the potential (albeit colloquial) effects onto an audience as mentioned above. Via the use of participation, spectators may be able to access a form of theatre that, as Ryan Reynolds suggests, can

build belief in alternative social logic, reveal an unseen aspect of capitalist power, or generate an absurd and awkward situation that momentarily breaches the seeming inevitability of capitalism and capitalist logic, allowing new thoughts and experiences to seep into the minds of audiences and participants.⁵

The above quote will act as a key citation for my definition of what political theatre should be. There are of course other forms of political theatre, other struggles, and other instances from around the globe to consider when defining such a broad tradition. However, for the benefit of this thesis I will opt to use the logic mentioned above as it directly cuts against contemporary capitalism, a key component of this paper.

McGrath is by no means the first to link the theatre and aspects of social change. Veritably, the theatre has long been championed as a tool for

⁵ Ryan Reynolds, *Moving Targets: Political Theatre is a Post-Political Age*, (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2008), p. 16.

change, liberation or emancipation. First to consider is the influence of theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht, himself an outspoken advocate of working class emancipation. I have intentionally not left space to go into great depth into either McGrath or Brecht, but, I do note them for their importance in this field of thought. Many of the theorists I mention throughout this investigation commit time to framing some of these theorists, predominantly Brecht, and have been noted for such work during the thesis. Brecht is a key figure in understanding how art and political theatre encompass the potential for political permutations. Anthony Squiers notes this in his work on the theory of Brecht. He comments that ‘According to Brecht the difficulties of social change “are not mastered by keeping silent about them” they are mastered by exposing them’⁶ further noting that ‘his theatre was a large-scale social experiment which sought to facilitate the advent of radical political and social change’.⁷ These thoughts, certainly gesturing to the difficulties of facilitating social change are paralleled in this investigation via the chosen case studies. This investigation ultimately revisits the issue Brecht was concerned with, which questions how best to breach the seeming impenetrability of capitalism via political art. The premise of working towards some degree of social change, or even the loaded term of emancipation through the prism of political

⁶ Anthony Squiers, *The Social and Political Philosophy of Bertolt Brecht* (Dissertation, Michigan: Western Michigan University, 2012), p. 48.

⁷ Squiers, *The Social and Political Philosophy of Bertolt Brecht*, p. 37.

theatre holds much contemporary relevance, as my selected case studies will exemplify.

A further useful axis for political theatre is found via Erwin Piscator who once propagated the creation and sustainability of a theatre that replaced capitalism with a classless society.⁸ Reynolds notes both the influence of Piscator and Brecht as central to the developments in the formulation of the now widely recognised political theatre history. Indeed, he posits that ‘Piscator and his sometime collaborator Bertolt Brecht are the two most influential figures to shape current connotations of the term ‘political theatre’’, whilst continuing to identify on Brecht the notion that an ‘audience’s capacity for judgement and action should be aroused’.⁹ Contemporary political theatre born out of a capitalist society is still often critiquing a capitalist system. Although the alternatives to capitalism are perhaps less visible than in previous political epochs, the underlying agenda of providing an alternative to capitalism still holds some credence. As Reynolds suggests

The most influential political theatres, of Brecht and Piscator, were contingent upon the existence of and belief in alternative social structures to capitalism – in this case Socialism and Communism.

These clear and tangible utilitarian aims seem impossible today in a

⁸ Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre* (London: Eyre Metheun Ltd, 1980).

⁹ Reynolds, *Moving Targets*, p. 19.

society with no revolutionary context or belief in such alternative social ideals.¹⁰

It would appear that in this moment Reynolds is highlighting a crucial cultural shift since the work of Brecht and Piscator as he argues that communist/socialist ideals are no longer so strongly believed in. Both Brecht and Piscator were committed to further understanding Marxism and producing a Marxist alternative to capitalism. In contemporary times, there has been a significant shift from Marxist to post-Marxist ideology, we can see this in Hal Foster's work¹¹ which seeks to examine the complex machinery of the culture industry, investigating postmodernism, historicism, the avant-garde and cultural politics more generally. Foster's work is applicable to much of this thesis as he muses upon topics I have a significant academic investment in, chiefly the movements of the avant-garde and political art, but more broadly the general school of thought presented in this work. Thinking specifically on the issue at hand, that of the shift from Marxist to post-Marxist alternatives, Foster notes that 'Marxist concepts, however self-critical or scientific, are subject to historical limits'.¹² Whilst Foster notes how Marxist concepts are imperative for an understanding of political theatre through time, it is

¹⁰ Reynolds, *Moving Targets*. p. 19.

¹¹ Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1999).

¹² Foster, *Recodings*, p. 140.

important to note that the struggles of political art shifted throughout the late 20th century to tackle issues such as race, gender and sexuality. As Foster comments, the articulations of these arguments required a different approach, namely ‘a shift in the position and function of the political artist’.¹³ Whilst the struggles and positions of political artists shifted, so too did the theory on which much of Marxist theory was centred. This was a necessary result of a rapidly changing economic framework. Furthermore, theory changed from focusing on the means of production to one that required a consideration of the cultural significance of consumption. Politically-engaged art was no longer necessarily Marxist, but instead, perhaps part of a consumer society. My case studies will evidence features of this co-optation. This important change in perspective will require continual reassessment as the nature of global art and economics respectively evolves through time. Foster is just one theorist mentioned in this paper (I will note Reynolds and Kershaw as other theorists who contribute to this point as they are both referenced in this thesis) who discusses the lack of credible alternatives to capitalism (such as the staunch values of communism). This demonstrates the problem of creating works of political theatre that seek to challenge or remain autonomous from the dominant ideology.

I intend to explicate the logic of politics grounded in contemporary participatory experience, assess the way this is achieved and analyse its effects

¹³ Foster, *Recodings*, p. 140.

using three contemporary case studies. Whilst these case studies may not propagate a palpable sense of outward political action i.e. revolt or strike, they may invoke a further understanding of the inner self, especially relevant when this leads to some form of social change. Indeed, as Richard Sennett clarifies, the term experience has a rather blunt meaning in English when compared to a German etymological understanding. Specifically, this double-edged inward and outward denotation can be linked to the German counterparts of *erlebnis* and *erfahrung*: ‘The first names an event or relationship that makes an emotional inner impress, the second an event, action, or relationship that turns one outward’.¹⁴ The case studies in this thesis will refrain from dealing directly with such loaded terms, but will expand upon this very logic, analysing how and in what ways attention can be turned inward i.e. political consciousness, or outward as part of a political project i.e. actively causing change.

Further inspiration on the issues of social change can be garnered from Jacques Rancière.¹⁵ Indeed, when thinking of emancipation within the sphere of theatre, it deserves, if not requires an understanding of his influential work, one which gave the term ‘emancipate’ its credence as a term within the academic theatre vernacular. This being said, it is important to note that “Rancière’s ideas about an active ‘emancipated spectator,’ intellectually and

¹⁴ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 288.

¹⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009).

ideologically freed from the shackles of mainstream commodification and right-wing reification, have been around at least since the days of Piscator, Brehct and Artaud”.¹⁶ Rancière muses upon the passivity of an audience and ponders upon an audience that can become active participants, switching from passivity to activity and abolishing the distance that creates it, in hope of emancipation of the spectator through a renewed understanding of methods of domination and subjection. The essence of Rancière’s theatre requires a change; an audience will no longer be passive spectators but instead become active participants in a collective performance framework based on equality. His model of political theatre strives for a democratic politics, not a mastery of political outcomes which undermines his logic of equality in art.¹⁷ This idea forms an important part of my analysis of control and system over the performance event creating an ethical dilemma. Importantly, Rancière believes that the arts carry the potential of initiating social change. Whilst he attempts to rearrange and address the power struggles in contemporary spectatorship, he does admit that art can change something in the world we live in, this along with other components of his logic will feature throughout the investigation. Certainly, my case studies will identify varying strategies of political theatre within the aims of instilling social change. This will be achieved by focussing on modes of experience and participation, ones that

¹⁶ Frank P Tomasulo, ‘The Emancipated Spectator’, *Studies in the Humanities*. 39/40(1/2) (2014), p. 304.

¹⁷ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009).

replace passivity with political and aesthetic activity. For example, Rancière's logic will be explicated to question whether movement models freedom, and can be used as an emancipatory tool. Furthermore, if traditional theatrical norms evidence the passivity of an audience, then contemporary theatre companies that utilise experience may help create an active political aesthetic. There are contemporary suggestions that emancipation is unable to be created through mediums of art¹⁸, however, I disagree with this notion completely. Instead, I contend that art can trigger a mode of agency which can be used to fuel emancipation.

A term often located within the discourse surrounding emancipation and other possible effects of political theatre is empowerment. In this thesis, empowerment is a term rarely used, but a notion often gestured to whilst navigating the subjects of participatory and political theatre. Helen Freshwater confirms the importance of the notion of political empowerment in theatre studies when advocating 'one of the most cherished orthodoxies in theatre studies: the belief in a connection between audience participation and political empowerment'.¹⁹ Throughout history, participation has historically been seen as a political gesture, for example when the avant-garde looked to escape commodification.

When considering political theatre, this thesis will pose that even the most oppositional, critical, and that which show characteristics of the

¹⁸ Tomasulo, 'The Emancipated Spectator', p. 305.

¹⁹ Helen Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 3.

traditional avant-garde heritage, risks co-optation by the capitalist system, ultimately sublimated into a commodity form. Eugene Ionesco provides a helpful, but rather dated musing upon the term avant-garde. He posits that

An avant-garde man is like an enemy inside a city which he is bent on destroying, against which he rebels; for like any system of governance, an established form of expression is also a form of oppression. The avant-garde man is the opponent of an existing system.²⁰

Whilst Ionesco's definition confirms the oppositional and anti-system aspects avant-garde art is often labelled with, its contemporary relevance may be brought into question, though, it should be recognised that Ionesco writes this at an important juncture in the life of the modern avant-garde tradition. The political theatre performances I have chosen resemble, at times, the political theatre most associated with the avant-garde movements of the past, as a fresh wave of activism against the capitalist system. They (at specific moments, and with differing success) mirror the way in which the avant-garde attacked the institution of art, seeking to disrupt the seemingly institutionalised commerce of art as commodity. I am arguing that using a fixed praxis of agentive effects I am able to judge their ability to intervene politically, or not, as will be shown

²⁰ Eugene Ionesco, 'The Avant Garde Theatre', *The Tulane Drama Review*, 5(2) (1960), p. 45.

specifically in all three case studies. Just as the historical avant-garde sought to subvert aesthetic institutions and values by integrating art into everyday life, so to do my case studies potentially seek to subvert the dominant aesthetic ideologies in an attempt to bring some, albeit rather nuanced, gesture of political resistance or alternative to the status quo. Whilst many theorists (for example: Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Roland Barthes, Robert Hughes, Eric Hobsbawm) argue the death of the avant-garde tradition,²¹ within my case studies it is visible how, and with what accomplishment, works of contemporary theatre succumb or contend with the all-encompassing logic of the commodity. In fact, I would argue that my chosen case studies exemplify on a gradual trajectory the burgeoning relative successes of participatory political theatre in reimagining the avant-garde tradition within a contemporary society more commodity saturated than ever before. I do not claim that my case studies *are* avant-garde, but that they resemble, through different strategies, such a heritage. Take for example, the Theatre of the Absurd, one of the later traditions in the avant-garde. This example cut against traditional literary and performance narratives in a truly peculiar way. Whereas most plays tend to offer characters, dialogue, and a structured plot and theme, one which manages to reach a tidy resolve, Theatre of the Absurd was often devoid of such tools e.g. no ending, or even a starting point. Analogous strange and ‘absurd’ moments can be identified in my chosen case

²¹ David Savran, ‘The Death of the Avant Garde’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 49(3) (2005) 10-42.

studies, ones that could help drive an audience into interrogating further what they see, hear and experience. Martin Esslin comments that

The Theatre of the Absurd, however, can be seen as the reflection of what seems to be the attitude most genuinely representative of our time. The hallmark of this attitude is its sense that the certitudes and unshakable assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish conclusions²²

Here we can see that the avant-garde heritage may have contemporary relevance, moreover, that assumptions can be questioned, e.g. the impenetrability of capitalism and the efficacy of political theatre. Most importantly, the Theatre of the Absurd played carefully with language, even devalued its importance. Instead, it was precisely what *happens* that would transcend the words spoken.²³ Whilst I am aware the context is largely different, I would contend that mobilised action via experience, instead of an absurd use of action of stage, can also seek to transcend the words spoken, and further an agenda that cuts against capitalist ideology. I suggest that the

²² Martin Esslin, *The Theater of the Absurd*, ed. by Bert Cardullo and Robert Knopf (CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 500.

²³ Esslin, *The Theater of the Absurd*, p. 491-502.

chosen case studies provide a new contemporary lens of analysis that could disrupt the logic that the avant-garde tradition perished. Instead, just like the avant-garde tradition, *aspects* of my case studies set themselves against the prevailing aesthetic norms. On this point, I will examine later in the case studies the importance of participating by non-participation, something I can explicate to mirror how the avant-garde's refusal to participate in the production of capitalist values furthered their positive participation in composing alternatives.²⁴

Precisely, political art that seeks to undermine capitalism whilst using a commodified experience rings true with Ionesco's avant-garde imagery of an enemy within. Foster notes the significance of two key terms; resistance and transgression. Crucially, Foster advances resistance as opposed to transgression. In Foster's view, transgression was culturally specific and historically bound. Resistance, however, uses the cultural as a place where active contestation is possible, thus is an important term for understanding the political in western art. This differentiation allows one to 'periodize strategies of transgression and resistance in terms of modernism and post-modernism'.²⁵ Foster's notion of resistance is applicable to this investigation, as the case studies I present offer varying (if any at all) examples of active contestation. They can be aligned with the avant-garde, but need to be done so with the

²⁴ Gavin Grindon, 'Surrealism, Dada, and the Refusal of Work: Autonomy, Activism, and Social Participation in the Radical Avant Garde', *Oxford Art Journal*, 34(1) (2011), 79-96.

²⁵ Foster, *Recodings*, p. 152.

understanding that they are not fixed subjects, instead, examples of historically specific and culturally positioned works of political art. This caution is essential as assessing contemporary works of performance must be combined with a contemporary knowledge of the cultural coordinates that position it within a given time. Foster's dissection of the avant-garde helps utilise the term for contemporary examples. He posits that reconsidering 'the status of the avant-garde is not to challenge its criticality in the past, but on the contrary to see how it may be re-inscribed as resistant, as critical in the present'.²⁶ In fact, he further argues that the codes which avant-garde art sought to transgress may no longer exist as such.²⁷ Instead, it can be understood how avant-garde political art was able to passage from transgression to a mode of critical resistance, this critical resistance is what helps structure the case studies I have opted for in this investigation, and something I believe to be an attainable target for theatre makers who employ certain modes of experience and participation.

To frame how and in what ways this investigation is political I will draw upon Fredric Jameson, whose work informs some of the contemporary debate required for this thesis, given his insight into the economisation of art, postulating on 'aesthetic production' (the reduction of political potency in art that has changed into a commodity made for monetary value) present in

²⁶ Foster, *Recodings*, p. 149.

²⁷ Foster, *Recodings*. P. 150.

capitalist society. Jameson's work²⁸ makes important contributions to the postmodern philosophical debate, aligning postmodernism with late global capitalism and emphasising that postmodernism 'is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process'.²⁹ Commodification will evidence itself as an important concept throughout this thesis, notably the ability of capitalist culture in transforming whatever possible into an object for trade, a notion which I have a particular interest in. When thinking specifically about commodification, and that of the commodification of an aesthetic, Jameson notes this trend within the epoch of late capitalism. Further, there is a reference to the idea that art may be no longer, if it ever has been, autonomous, and as such has been subject to the subjugation of late capitalism. There is of course an argument to suggest that art has *never* been autonomous, Marx himself argues that art is a mode of production within social relations, inseparable from capitalist modes of production.³⁰ For now, this complex and pervasive debate will remain pending. Jameson's analysis is particularly salient when considering the view that 'aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally'.³¹ Most applicable to this investigation are the moments in which Jameson positions experience in relation to aesthetic commodification. In this respect, Jameson's

²⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

²⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. x.

³⁰ Jackson Petsche, 'The Importance of Being Autonomous: Towards a Marxist Defense of Art for Art's Sake', *Mediations: Journal of the Marxist Literary Group*, 26(1-2) (2012/2013), 143-159, 149.

³¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 9.

work has similarities to the theoretical position on which this work is grounded. The attempts to provide emancipation through various modes of ‘experience’ within art can and continue to be sublimated into an aesthetic commodity. The often ‘shallow’ sensory experiences on offer in certain forms of art, will be shown to include participation as a common contemporary component. As will be demonstrated, participation, along with a number of individual experiential features are present in the varied works of the chosen case studies.

Unable to circumvent the societal structure afforded to it, art, moreover politicised art, is adopted by the system of global capitalism. On this point Jameson adds that ‘even the most offensive forms of this art... are all taken in stride by society and they are commercially successful’.³² He further comments on how an advanced mode of capitalism renders art unable to instigate political change. In Jameson’s view, aspects of liberation i.e. the potential emancipatory effect(s) of political theatre to breach the inevitability of capitalist logic can be *easily* transferred into a ‘thrill’ when entrenched within the workings of commodified culture. On this point Jackson Petsche synthesises Jameson’s work to say

³² Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 26.

The transformation from tension into ‘pleasure’ or ‘thrill’ explicates the reason for the shallow sensory experiences of art... Any ‘aspects of liberation’ that may exist in a work of art can easily become repressed and sublimated into a form of ‘thrill’ amidst the aestheticization of the commodity.³³

Commodification itself is by no means a new phenomenon, yet I would argue that its intensity and centralisation are highlighted today in societies saturated by consumerism and commercialism. As Jean Baudrillard states ‘We are at the point where consumption is laying hold of the whole of life’.³⁴ I am reminded of the important ruminations on this subject by Foster, he proposes that “Culture is no longer simply a realm of value set apart from the instrumental world of capitalist logic ... it too is commodified.”³⁵ If it can be accepted that *culture* has been subject to a commodification, art, and within art, theatre, falls within this praxis. This will be key to the exploration present within the case study analyses. Thinking back to cultural commodification requires an understanding of key sources such as the work of Karl Marx, specifically his concept of ‘commodity fetishism’ which suggests the social relationships in production are not among people but instead among money and commodities.

³³ Jackson Petsche, ‘The Importance of Being Autonomous’.

³⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2017 revised edn), p. 46.

³⁵ Foster, *Recodings*, p. 159.

This logic would further suggest that capitalism had managed to endow things such as culture with a ‘mystical character’ giving them heightened value in an economised framework. In a society where *everything* is seemingly open to commodification, culture is an ‘industry’ too vast and rich to escape the pillage from consumer capitalism. As Theodor Adorno states ‘The cultural commodities of the industry are governed... by the principle of their realization as value, and not by their own specific content and harmonious formation’,³⁶ seemingly the wider concept of culture has been co-opted by the power of capitalism. Foster notes the power and status of the new commodity, suggesting even resistance to it may constitute a product of it. He notes that

the commodity no longer requires the guise of a personal or social value for us to submit to it: it has its own excuse, its own ideology. Here capital has penetrated even the sign, with the result that resistance to the code via the code is almost structurally impossible. Worse, this resistance may be collusive with the very action of capital.³⁷

The consumption of this ‘code’, one whose subliminal supremacy is apparent to Foster, permits us to unknowingly reproduce the system at hand. As I will

³⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Culture Industry Reconsidered: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 86.

³⁷ Foster, *Recodings*, p. 147.

go on to illustrate, refuting the 'system' requires a change in approach in order to produce more than tacit reproduction of the inhibiting system of control.

Reflecting more upon the power of capitalism allows a return to the work of Reynolds. In a similar vein to this investigation, Reynolds also relies upon the work of Jameson and remains vehement that his reader should understand the importance of capitalism in Westernised societies. Here he posits that 'I find the theories of Fredric Jameson... adequately capture my experience of contemporary society, in which consumer capitalism seems to be a fact of life rather than a topic for discussion and debate'.³⁸ Reynolds also deduces that 'in Jameson's view, postmodernism indicates apolitical art because the cultural realm of which theatre is a part is inextricable from the economic and political realms'.³⁹ Whilst an investigation into apolitical art is important, it has not been granted the time it deserves within the wider frameworks of this thesis. Instead, the merging of the economic and political realms is where this analysis seeks to work, an area discussed by both Jameson and Reynolds respectively. Returning to the logic that capitalism may be treated as a fact of life, Reynolds posits on an apparent inevitability, he suggests that he 'truly could not fathom a fundamental critique of capitalist society. Capitalism feels inevitable to the degree that I still have great difficulty even imagining an alternative'.⁴⁰ When considering an alternative

³⁸ Reynolds, *Moving Targets*, p. 21.

³⁹ Reynolds, *Moving Targets*, p. 21.

⁴⁰ Reynolds, *Moving Targets*, p. 9.

that modes of art could seek to advance, examples are few and their reputations often seem devoid of credibility. Working within this imposing system, it would appear that contemporary works of art lose their capacity to shock or disturb the status quo, further, the notion of fundamental change seems to have disappeared from view.⁴¹ Reynolds confirms the fate of political theatre's marriage with commodity culture when suggesting

for most theatre – even political theatre – the outcome is a complete retention of the status quo, or even a strengthening of it. Certainly it is clear that simply having radical aims or controversial content is insufficient, since the capitalist system is so adept at incorporating opposition into commodity culture.⁴²

'System', by which I mean an organised scheme or method, and, a complex whole built of mechanisms and networks, is a significant undercurrent of all three case study chapters. In this particular context the performances exhibit different uses of the notion of system. As the gradual evidencing of political potential becomes apparent to the reader, so too does the developed understanding of system become apparent. In the first case study chapter (*Who*

⁴¹ Reynolds, *Moving Targets*, p. 16.

⁴² Reynolds, *Moving Targets*, p. 15.

Cares), the practical performance system seems to permit a mode of participation, but this participation is only as and when the system dictates, a lanyard on your neck determines your route around the theatre building and the performance structure is unyielding. Conforming to this system seems to validate it. The overarching premise questions to what extent the system of capitalism may be dictating and co-opting this form of art. Specifically, as will be evidenced in this case study, the manipulation of material and mastery over proceedings in the verbatim form will complicate the argument surrounding the politics of verbatim theatre within the boundaries of the commodification of experience. The idea of manipulation will present itself across in various moments of this thesis. In the second case study (*Fight Night*) I will identify a pre-subscribed system which decides for its audience. This case study presents the illusory image of the audience having control over the performance system at hand, however, all is not what it seems. The scripted performance structure alongside few invitations to participate demonstrates the lack of agency afforded to an audience, instead, showing how power ultimately lies with those at the apex, the theatre makers. This concept is mirrored again to the wider system of capitalism wherein citizens are unable to cause tangible change to an inherited system of governance. The final case study (*Early Days*) moves to firstly look at games as systems. By looking at the workings of this game, wider democratic systems are interrogated. Via the interrogation of modern-day democracy (which falls into discussions regarding the contemporary system of capitalism) any possible critique is placed under

scrutiny. However, this case study presents a unique form of participatory democracy, a form that may permit a heightened mode of agency and an optimistic approach to participatory political theatre within capitalist structures. Crucially, there is a complicated relationship between capitalism and democracy. In seemingly all democratic nations there exists a market, of course, not all capitalist nations are democratic. However, the fundamental argument of democracy is that people ‘the people rule’ and we as citizens are granted with political equality, e.g. my vote is of equal weighting to the vote of somebody with a government position when it comes to the general election. However, under the currently neoliberal ideology, it would appear that all people are equal, however some are *more* equal than others based on capital. With a system so determined by the irrational drive towards the creation of capital regardless of impact, perhaps elements of democracy are being undermined, such as the grossly unequal allocation of political power for large corporations compared to the ordinary citizen. Take for instance the way in which businesses can fund election campaigns for political parties, in what is potentially a *quid pro quo* agreement. I would claim that elements of contemporary democracy have also been co-opted by the power of global capitalism. However, there are those that believe modern democracy cannot function without a free-market economy. Further, that the global reach of the capitalist system has proven its productive features in garnering political and economic freedoms. It is interesting to note how

The desire for a democratic political system does not by itself create the capacity for establishing one. The key to establishing a working democracy, and in particular the institutions of liberty, has been the free-market economy. The institutions, skills, and values needed to operate a free-market economy are those that, in the political sphere, constitute democracy⁴³

This quote suggests that capitalism has gone some way to creating democracy courtesy of a free-market economy. Here we can see the inextricable link between capitalism and democracy, a noteworthy point as this thesis discusses issues on both respective elements.

This being said, theatre and democracy also have an important relationship, and quite evidently stand in relation to one another. This notion will ruminate throughout the thesis also. It is often said that theatre requires a democracy in order to flourish, however, democracy may require theatre, and the arts more generally, in order to challenge democracy.

System is a key element of all three pieces. Via a dissection of the notion of system, political theatre, it would appear, may be at times supporting

⁴³ Chris Coyne, 'Capitalism and democracy take two', *The Economist*, (31st August 2007), <<https://www.economist.com/free-exchange/2007/08/31/capitalism-and-democracytake-two>> [accessed 19 April 2018].

capitalism rather than acting as a mode of critique. Even the most radical, avant-garde-esque political theatre risks subjugation to the capitalist system. Further, whatever performance system is given to an audience may distract from their responsibility to question the larger systems at hand. Indeed, Reynolds admires the magnitude of capitalism's success in this area, he muses upon its capabilities of avoiding responsibility and co-opting subversive elements, easily absorbing them into the fold of consumer society. Cynically, capitalism is not only described as inevitable, but also impenetrable. It would appear that

The fortress of capitalism remains impenetrable because, in fact, no fortress can ever be located. It seems possible, then, that the increase of speed at which capitalism seems to absorb conflict, disagreement, or even just impropriety, might mark a considerable change in the required approach to political theatre.⁴⁴

Potential approaches will be suggested via the chosen case studies, offering examples of political theatre's plight against and/or within such an imposing system via the utilisation of participation and experience. Even an advanced

⁴⁴ Reynolds, *Moving Targets*, p. 26.

mode of capitalism, one which seemingly renders art unable to instigate political change, will be shown to contain the succinct potential for critique via the use of commodified products of culture.

Importantly, I do contend with many of the conclusions Reynolds reaches in his research, and in truth, some of this project will look to contest his pessimism. This thesis will demonstrate how specific modes of participation are key to combating the capitalist impasse Reynolds seems to accept. Challenging this pessimism will be achieved by focussing on how participation can be effectively used as an agentive tool. Whilst case studies like *Who Cares* may seemingly confirm the unspoken defeatism uttered by Reynolds, I believe moments within *Fight Night* and *Early Days* are able to provide an important counter-argument to his ruminations, specifically via their unique utilisation of participatory elements and subsequent effects.

MORE THAN A COMMODITY?

Joseph Pine and James Gilmore suggest that following a sequence of agrarian, industrial and, most recently, service economies, comes the experience economy.¹ Pine and Gilmore undergo an extensive economic analysis of consumer trends, noting the gravitation of purchase behaviour towards the quality of an experience rather than solely the product and service respectively. Their work tracks the production of, moreover, the investment in experience, as something in high demand for businesses around the world. Using examples such as Niketown, Build-A-Bear, Starbucks etc., Pine and Gilmore reflect upon the shift towards non-material commodities, suggesting the production of experiences as a proponent of the rapidly expanding economic sector. Given the sector's success, the proficient utilisation of

¹ Joseph Pine, and, James Gilmore, revised edn, *The Experience Economy*, (MA, USA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2011).

experience is therefore apt to be pounced upon as a viable business opportunity. Pine and Gilmore note that ‘when he[sic] buys an experience, he pays to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages – as in a theatrical play – to engage him in a personal way’.² This investigation will analyse the production of experience through the prism of contemporary theatre, in order to assess the effects that such a relationship may generate. James Frieze suggests that theatrical performances have aligned ‘themselves with the corporate packaging of culture’.³ Contemporary political theatre may have been subject to a flagrant commodification courtesy of the allure of a promised experience which include enticing intimate, thrilling or frisson inducing *experiences*. Alston tracks the very production of pleasurable, narcissistic and often ‘sexy’ theatre events which he directly connects to a proliferating experience economy.⁴ This notion is further identified via the work of Wouter Hillaert, who suggests that

The experience industry refers to a grouped set of businesses that produce and usually look to profit from the provision of memorable or

² Pine, and, Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*, p. 3.

³ James Frieze, ‘A Game of two halves: Participation, performance and All That is Wrong’ *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 33(3) (2013) 321-336, 322.

⁴ Adam Alston, ‘Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, Agency and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre’, *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 18(2) (2013), 128-138, 130.

stimulating experiences, such as theme parks, strip-clubs and role-play adventures.⁵

There seems to be a great deal of attention on the investment in an audience for both academic scholarship and the theatre industry alike. As Freshwater clarifies, whereas theatre scholarship chiefly examines how an audience interprets what they see, the theatre industry is ‘concerned with ensuring the profitability of its investment and is consequently more interested in why a production appeals and in generalising about patterns of consumption’.⁶ For example, Punchdrunk has corporate relationships with companies such as Stella Artois or Louis Vuitton as an example of the prosperous marriage of culture and commercial business.⁷ These kind of theatre makers rely upon the production of experience to enhance the consumable, marketable and ultimately profitable commerciality of their work. However, the participatory experience is a product not solely reserved for the work of immersive theatre companies. Equally, such companies are not the only beneficiaries of commercial success from experiential performances. Mayura Wickstrom notes this when analysing the experience-driven offerings from corporate elites such

⁵ Wouter Hillaert, ‘(Long) Live the Experience: Reflections on Performance, Pleasure and Perversion’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 20(4) (2010), 432-436, 434.

⁶ Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, p. 30.

⁷ Adam Alston, ‘The Promise of Experience: Immersive Theatre in the Experience Economy’ (pre-publication draft copy received in direct correspondence with Alston over email (2015)). Published version found in *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance* ed. by James Frieze (2016)).

as Nike and Coke, observing the increased physical involvement and sensory immersion available to her. She perceives how these companies are able to ‘create experiential environments through which the consumer comes to embody the resonances of the brand as feelings, sensations, and even memories’.⁸ It may be that whilst theatre companies do not ostensibly share the overt economic agendas akin to the aforementioned corporate giants, utilising the same experience-based techniques in theatre performances may erode a spectator’s capacity to discover a radical or at least critical action because their social relationship is based on the trading of a commodity rather than an emancipatory agenda. My final case study analysis will provide a somewhat different conclusion to this notion.

This overarching issue is a by-product of an ethos garnered under the banner of contemporary global capitalism and neoliberalist agenda. Frieze notes how the utilisation of experience has a ‘complicity with an experience economy perceived to be the *modus operandi* of neoliberalism’.⁹ Further, Alston uses the comments of Geraldine Harris when discussing the position of theatre within neoliberalism, quoting her to say

an assumption often seems to run through such charges of

⁸ Mayura Wickstrom, *Performing Consumers: Global capital and its theatrical seduction* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2006), p. 2.

⁹ James Frieze, ‘Beyond the Zero-Sum Game: Participation and the Optics of Opting’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 25(2) (2015), 216-229, 228.

neoliberalism that cultural domains operate separately from one another, so that theatre can transcend the neoliberal, experience economy to which other domains are subject. Theatre, on the contrary, does not exist in a special cultural space cut off from that occupied by television, nor does it exist separately from the culture of commerce in our high streets and online. It is precisely *because* theatre is a constitutive part of culture that its ability to alienate cultural norms and conditions is so vital. (original emphasis)¹⁰

As Harris points out, the theatre industry is a 'constitutive part of culture' and can therefore be subject to the economisation true to neoliberal ideology. Therefore, if it can be taken as fact that art can, and continues to be sublimated into an aesthetic commodity, as Jameson would posit¹¹, then a logical advancement is that the genre of political theatre, is by proxy as susceptible to commodification, a notion that will be illustrated in different ways via the case study analysis.

The production of experience, such as a promised opportunity to participate in and with a theatrical performance confirms, how, within contemporary theatre practice 'experience production is drawn into an overtly economic terrain'.¹² Kershaw helps elucidate this notion when he posits that

¹⁰ Alston, 'The Promise of Experience'.

¹¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 26.

¹² Alston, 'The Promise of Experience'.

‘just as political differences between left and right are seen as a false dichotomy, so culture and cash, art and big business, theatre and commerce tend to collapse into each other’.¹³ I would suggest that the relationship between theatre and commerce seems to be at an unprecedented level under the current neoliberal agenda, thinking of examples of Punchdrunk and their relationship with Stella. This is a disconcerting concept when considering the emancipatory role political theatre could play in society. As I have argued, global capitalism is adept at co-opting potentially critical or radical elements of society and incorporating them into culture. This is a stumbling block for my opinion which is that political theatre can act as a bastion of social change.

As mentioned, Alston, amongst others tracks the alignment of features of immersive theatre to the experience economy. Immersive theatre, according to Josephine Machon, is ‘a term applied to diverse events that blend a variety of forms and seek to exploit all that is experiential in performance, placing the audience at the heart of the work’.¹⁴ Alston proposes ‘immersive theatre is about *experience*’ (original emphasis), further noting that ‘experience is not just a fortunate by-product of the theatre event, but is, in many respects, immersive theatre’s *raison d’être*’ (original emphasis).¹⁵ Specifically, modes of participation, which are also present in the political theatre case studies presented in this investigation (politically charged participatory performances

¹³ Baz Kershaw, ‘Discouraging Democracy: British Theatre and Economics, 1979 - 1999’, *Theatre Journal*, 51(3) (1999), 266 -283, 281/282.

¹⁴ Josephine Machon, *On Being Immersed: The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding*, ed. by James Frieze, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 29.

¹⁵ Alston, ‘Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value’, 130.

are not as frequently discussed in current academic discourse), align with what Alston describes as modes forms of theatre that are ‘particularly susceptible to co-optation by a neoliberal market given its compatibility with the growing experience industry’.¹⁶ These modes may include a range of multi-sensory stimulations and differing viewing positions, including dialogue, role-playing and interaction. Importantly, the senses are not just engaged, but can be somewhat manipulated as I will go on to examine. These stimulations could be seen as escapist, confrontational, intimate or even at times erotic. All these combine to create a model of practice in which participation offers an aesthetic based upon experience. Permitting modes of participation to an audience has a particular resonance with the popular methods of immersive theatre performances analysed in depth by Alston amongst other academics in the field, including the findings of Frieze, Machon and Gareth White.¹⁷

Relevant to this thesis, and a source of inspiration is more of Alston’s work in which he analyses contemporary immersive theatre practice performed in London.¹⁸ Alston focuses specifically on the work of immersive theatre, but his findings on the functions of immersive practice are applicable to this thesis. He notes that

¹⁶ Alston, ‘Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value’, 128.

¹⁷ Gareth White, ‘On Immersive Theatre’, *Theatre Research International*, 37(3) (2012), 221-235.

¹⁸ Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

The production of immersive theatre takes place within the experience economy and immersive theatre aesthetics often promote neoliberal values; however, immersive theatre makers are still finding ways to frustrate the romanticism of audience productivity in immersive settings, and interrogate the commodification of experience.¹⁹

Frieze notes the importance of terminology in this area with particular reference to ‘immersive’ and ‘interactive’. These terms seem to be almost ubiquitous in contemporary performance practice, as they promise a participatory experience.²⁰ Whilst I would contend that there is still a wealth of ambiguity to these terms, I will locate them in terms of my argument in this thesis, and do so now due to their applicability to logic on the experience economy. The term immersive refers to a form of theatre that places the participant at the centre of the work via the use of the experiential, audience members are invited to posit themselves as productive participants.²¹ Of course, I am not looking expressly at immersive theatre, I am choosing to focus on political theatre that harnesses and manipulates the senses and bodily engagement. Therefore, I am interested in how immersion in and with a performance may ultimately create agency, or not, as the case may be.

¹⁹ Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, p. 21/22.

²⁰ Frieze, ‘Beyond the Zero-Sum Game’, 225.

²¹ Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, p. 6.

Immersion is different to interactivity. Interactive theatre, which components of my case studies exemplify, demands participation. Interactive theatre is a much more physical, tangible form of action that requires a direct input from participants. What is evident from research on the two terms, is that, their meanings and definitions are often confused. White simply defines participation for both an audience and/or an audience member as being involved in the action of the performance.²²

This being said, it is essential to note the differing functions of some of these terms within theatre tradition. The use of participation for theorists such as Boal and Brecht was intended to empower active and critical resistance against given cultural forms of oppression. Boal's work, which operated unquestionably with modes of action and participation was in part inspired by Paulo Freire, specifically the way that Boal strived for a political consciousness grounded in experience.²³ The chosen case studies exemplify experiences that may induce a political consciousness. They exhibit varying degrees of participatory experience, but do not champion the same ardent political agenda Boal was able to produce in his work. Reflecting the work of Duska Radosavljevic,²⁴ the mechanisms at work in the case studies in this investigation may preclude the kinds of options for its audience that Boal's

²² Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p. 4.

²³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (30th Anniversary edn.) (London: Bloomsbury, 2005).

²⁴ Duska Radosavljevic, 'The Machinery of Democracy', *Exeunt Magazine*, (April 27 2015) <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/the-machinery-of-democracy/>> [accessed 21 February 2016].

work celebrated. As I will go on to evidence in detail, immersive practice that permits participation holds the potential to create political agency. As Alston suggests, ideally ‘the audience both enters an immersive world, and allows that world to pervade their thought and feeling and to motivate action’.²⁵

In my opinion these modes of experience largely fail to produce any substantial form of critical attack on dominant capitalist and neoliberal culture. As my case studies will reveal, however, there are few and somewhat nuanced aspects of performance that permit a mode of participation that empowers a critical challenge. Crucially, measuring the agency of performance is somewhat troublesome, as will be exemplified. The contemporary participatory theatre sphere, a vast and varied repertoire of performance, inclusive of a number of experiential properties, may at times fail to implore its audience into attaining a genuine form of political agency. Experiential, physical, sensory, emotional and participatory features of contemporary performance do not necessarily provide a pathway for emancipation. Reynolds would insinuate fundamentally the opposite, an almost complete submission to a capitalist agenda. However, I will demonstrate how and in what way there may be political agency in these performances.

Though the chosen case studies have a number of significant aspects in common, they are chosen, individually, for a specific purpose. As I will demonstrate, the three chosen case studies highlight the fact that theatre has

²⁵ Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, p. 218.

become commodified. I would argue, furthermore, that all institutional theatre is commodified, due to its obligation to create revenue. As Kershaw suggests 'Most theatre, and especially mainstream theatre, is a curious cultural commodity'.²⁶ All three case studies identify the use of experience and participation; they also incite the question as to whether the performances accurately critique capitalism rather than merely acting as a product of it. All three case studies use strategies of participation that could be seen as both political and an example of commodification. However, the three performances provide to and depend upon the audience in distinctly different ways. *Who Cares* does not wholly depend upon an audience, whereas *Early Days* employs its audience in an involving and unique way by allowing them to fashion their own experience without much authorship. Throughout the trajectory of this investigation as the narrative of participation develops with each case study, the reader should note that so too does the political potential. What is presented are three varying examples of participation and agency, consistently set against the locus of the 2015 general election. The use of the term agency is used specifically in this thesis on participatory performance. I will use Astrid Breel's definition to help clarify this term, as she investigates agency within the remit of participatory performance, she suggests that

²⁶ Baz Kershaw, *Framing the audience for theatre*, ed. by Nicholas Abercrombie, Russell Keat and Nigel Whiteley (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 164.

Agency in participatory performance has direct aesthetic, ethical and political implications, but it is also a situated, relational experience that places the participant as part of the performance and suggests a level of authorship with the ability to make decisions.²⁷

Certainly, my case studies will evidence moments in which participants can and cannot make decisions, further, the implications of the experience for an audience. Breel notes how agency is a messy and complicated dynamic between the given participants and performance structure, but continues to contribute a framework as to how the discussion on agency can be better understood. Breel lists four levels of agency: reactive, interactive, proactive, and creative. My analysis will demonstrate all four types of agency that Breel identifies at different points and for different reasons. For clarity, I will paraphrase Breel's definitions and list below:

1. Reactive agency: happens in direct response to a request or invitation.
i.e. answering a question.

²⁷ Astrid Breel, 'Agentive Behaviour, creative agency and the experience of agency: towards a contextual framework of agency in participatory performance', *Audience, Experience, Desire: Interactivity and participation in contemporary performance & the cultural industries* (University of Exeter, Department of Drama, 29-30th January 2016), <https://www.academia.edu/22353721/Agentive_behaviour_creative_agency_and_the_experience_of_agency_towards_a_contextual_framework_of_agency_in_participatory_performance> [accessed 21 February 2016].

2. Interactive agency: a participant's contribution in response to an invitation which could include more choice and present itself in different ways.
3. Proactive agency: self-initiated contribution, made without a specific invitation, sitting outside of the affordances of the situation.
4. Creative agency: creatively contributing to performance adding distinct features that did not explicitly exist before.

As with many of the findings in this thesis, agency is a notion fraught with practical and ethical questions, especially in the case of participatory performance. As Frieze inquires 'How are the participants coerced, and what do they comply with, in co-operatively doing and playing? How are they given an illusion of control?'.²⁸ The offering of agency does not automatically allow an audience to perceive it or respond to it. The offering of participation does not guarantee agency. Agency does not guarantee that the performance is good. Agency does not constitute control over a performance. With the artists providing agency for their audience, always being one step ahead, they could be accused of manipulating agency for a desired outcome. This questions whether the agency on offer is authentic. How 'free' is the supposed free agency an audience is occasionally empowered to explore? Is there an inherent

²⁸ James Frieze, *Reframing Immersive Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 13

inequality between participant and theatre maker? This thesis will examine different modes of 'free' agency and suggest an underlying inequality between participant and theatre maker.

Defining agency necessitates a brief thought upon its efficacy. If I am suggesting agency is apparent in the case studies presented, I must make clear how I plan to measure its efficacy. Herein lies the problem. To fully measure the efficacy of the works at hand would require a new project in order to fully substantiate my claims through a method of quantitative research. I intentionally refrain from making grand claims of the efficacious power of my case studies, but I do examine (with caution) strategies of political theatre that bare the potential to lead towards social change, therefore I must evidence exactly how efficacy situates itself within this thesis. Jeanne Marie Colleran questions 'is it possible to calculate the political efficacy of a dramatic work'.²⁹ Without a formal method of analysing responses from audience members, I argue that it is nigh on impossible to accurately measure efficacy. Further, I would pose that the very nature of true efficacy is not bound to a time-constrained performance, but actually in the resounding thoughts and conversations that take place well after the performance has finished, again, unmeasurable. As Brecht said 'it would be quite wrong to judge a play's relevance or lack of relevance by its current effectiveness. Theatre's don't

²⁹ Elaine Brousseau, 'Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater', ed. by Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S Spencer (MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. 257.

work that way'.³⁰ Discourse on the efficacy of political theatre tends to take a dated approach, however the recent marriage of the theatre industry and neoliberalism grants a new investigation. Rebecca Hillman supports this claim when saying 'In 2015, the concept of live performances as having efficacy to instigate political change remains contested' as she believes that 'capitalism is being critiqued and resisted with renewed urgency'.³¹ I believe that the primary agenda of political theatre is to be efficacious, if not, it is merely entertainment. What is more, I would contend that most performance do nothing to achieve this efficacious objective. However, I do believe that theatre should strive for small-scale moments of efficacy, and I am apprehensive of those who boldly claim political theatre holds the power to do anything other than contribute instances of change. I am enthused by Michael Kirby who comments that

That is how the direct influence of art and theatre society progresses – not immediately, through many people, but by diffusion from the few to the many... the theatre we should look to as the progenitor of social change is not a theatre of the masses, a theatre of entertainment and education, but a specialized theatre that investigates, among other

³⁰ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 7.

³¹ Rebecca Hillman, '(Re)constructing Political Theatre: Discursive and Practical Frameworks for Theatre as an Agent for Change' *New Theatre Quarterly*, 31(4) (2015) 380-396, 380.

things, the possibilities of perception and of the mind³²

Baz Kershaw comments similarly to Kirby that theatre *can* have an efficacious influence, however minutely, to wider social and political realities. No matter the scale, he comments unequivocally that theatre ‘does possess the power to pose questions, change attitudes and inspire action’³³, it is exactly this that I gesture towards when speaking of the potential of the strategies identified throughout this thesis. However, I do identify strategies of political theatre, ones which use targeted modes of experience, which I believe can be reproduced for a mass audience, potentially emboldening an emancipatory agenda. Without exception, I am aware that observed strategies could equally *preclude* efficacy for audience members, and so too emancipation. There is no guaranteed solution, only claims to suggest efficacious potential. Yet, it is my view that when citizens come together and are permitted to enact a meaningful change to a performance structure with rich political content, efficacy is exposed and made attainable. Groups coming together to seek change is still a popular mode of expression today in real world politics. In 2011 record numbers demonstrated their collective voice as the UK demonstrated the highest number of days lost due to strike action since the late 1920’s. Evidently, citizens believe that registering their voice in a public sphere can

³² Michael Kirby, *A Formalist Theatre* (PHL: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), p. 95.

³³ Hussein Al-Badri, *Tony Kushner’s Postmodern Theatre: A Study of Political Discourse* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006), p. 52/53.

cause some form of change, so I provoke a thought that theatre can be used in the same means.

Participation in and with the Experience Economy

Thinking further on important phraseology, participation is a term well known within the remit of capitalism, however its emancipatory potential seems abeyant or even nullified by an inhibiting system of control. As Florian Malzacher proposes

Participation is a word that seems to have become well-nigh useless in our all-inclusive capitalism. A sedative, which, as side-effect, delegates the responsibility for what happens to the citizen who is impotent to influence the outcome of events. The same applies to so-called participatory theatre, which all too often is only an imitation of such placebo participation and forces the audience to engage in a predictable set-up in which all options have been prescribed. Passivity disguised as activity.³⁴

³⁴ Florian Malzacher, *Unrest and Discontent – Political Theatre as Agonistic Field* (n.d), <<https://www.goethe.de/en/kul/tut/gen/tup/20776967.html>> [accessed 17 May 2016].

This thesis engages with this critique of participation by suggesting that participation is often impotent, further, that activity is often illusory, passivity is a more accurate descriptor of such an experience. Beyond this analysis the case studies represent examples of fluctuating accomplishment of the potential for participatory political theatre in the ultimate agenda of emancipating an audience. These case studies could provide a pathway for those who rally against contemporary capitalism, prime examples of how political theatre must position itself as the ‘enemy within’. Whilst moving in alignment with capitalism and an experience economy, political theatre that harnesses modes of experience may not solely be seen as products for trade, but instead uncover nuanced instances of activity instead of blanket passivity.

What happens when performances are both political and experiential? As Petsche suggests, ‘art at once opposes society and exists as a product of society. The question is whether or not art can more specifically oppose social relations while simultaneously being a commodity of social relations’.³⁵ When a piece of art is contaminated by the economic realm, as will be evidenced by the production of overtly economised and commodified use of experience for its audience, the art itself may fail to create a form of agency that could lead to emancipation.

³⁵ Petsche, ‘The Importance of Being Autonomous’, 146.

Whilst the resulting effects of political theatre's economisation often seem injurious to the ideals it is often branded with, there is credence to the logic, as I will argue, that the experiential can contribute to a positive outcome. Whilst it would appear that the experience economy cuts against everything an avant-garde theatre set out to achieve, there may still be political potential in contemporary works. This would be akin to the conclusions of Nicolas Bourriaud.³⁶ Bourriaud notes the change in artistic creation that has utilised modes of interaction as a method of inducing relational sociability. In the creation of a new aesthetic, one that produces an 'encounter', art moves from basic aesthetic consumption, to producing a relational, sociable, and ultimately political project. Therefore, according to Bourriaud, participatory art, i.e. one that forefronts the experiential, could be an effective way of critiquing society, given that it operates beyond the basic aesthetic model. This results in a relational aesthetic that accepts the restrictions and social formulations of contemporary capitalism, but proffers some optimism to the thinking that art, and by proxy political theatre, can provide a pathway to emancipation via the use of the experiential. This means that experiential political theatre could carry the potential to create agency even within an inhibiting system. Bourriaud is accepting of the need to work within the existing real.³⁷ This existing real cements the immovability of the inhibiting system of capitalism. Sharing the cynicism of operating outside of the

³⁶ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon, France: Les Presses du Réel, 2009).

³⁷ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 9.

structures of capitalism, he comments that ‘for anything that cannot be marketed will inevitably vanish’,³⁸ provoking the thought that the longevity and success of the art form depends upon its commercial marketability. Relational invention may require a willingness to work within the structures and limitations of global capitalism, such invention Bourriaud describes as

Meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals, and places of conviviality, in a word all manner of encounter and relational invention thus represent, today... a production of forms with something other than a simple aesthetic consumption in mind.³⁹

Therefore, if relational art is able to support a political project, even by using overtly commodified features, emancipation on some level becomes imaginable. Here Bourriaud notes, ‘Contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavours to move into the relational realm’.⁴⁰ Contemporary participatory art must focus on a relational aesthetic in order to create tangible change. Much of the experiential visible in participatory work

³⁸ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 9.

³⁹ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 28-29.

⁴⁰ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 17.

only ever forms the illusion of agency via the façade of some kind of investment in experience. If political theatre was able to offer an un-prescribed form of collaborative work between maker and participant, one could see the diminishing role of activity disguised as passivity and replace this with emancipation embodied via a tangible form of participation. This would create a social rather than a manipulative form of art. Claire Bishop questions what kinds of human relations relational art can produce, what do they look like, who are they for, why, and what democratic merit do they possess?⁴¹ However, what is more discerning is how Bishop dissects the overriding aims of Bourriaud's work. When thinking of the potential emancipatory elements available through art, Bishop notes⁴² the change from a utopian agenda to a set of microutopias, suggesting art may create more achievable, perhaps even 'bite-sized', moments of change within the existing real rather than changing the environment imposed upon them. She notes a shift in attitude towards social change, wherein artists seem to provide solutions in a present context, instead of attempting to transform their environment. Instead of creating a new and future utopia, artists learn to inhabit their world in a better way, setting up microutopias in the present. She quotes Bourriaud in this moment who comments on how 'It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbors in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows',⁴³ Bishop

⁴¹ Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', 110, (City University of New York: October, 2004), 51-79.

⁴² Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics'.

⁴³ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 45.

emphasises that the microutopian ethos is linked to the core political significance of relational aesthetics. It is worth noting that Bishop also heavily critiques Bourriaud, whilst important, her critique has not been granted space in this thesis as it is not highly relevant to the practical workings of this work.

These microutopian moments, or, perhaps better imagined as a constellation of singular acts of resistance against capitalism, are of extreme value to the discourse of political theatre. What will be evidenced during the given case studies is that these specific moments of participation permit the work to emancipate an audience via the use of relational art. As Bishop clarifies

The interactivity of relational art is therefore superior to optical contemplation of an object, which is assumed to be passive and disengaged, because the work of art is a ‘social form’ capable of producing positive human relationships. As a consequence, the work is automatically political in implication and emancipatory in effect.⁴⁴

The more relational, active and engaged the work is, the more emancipatory the work becomes, evidence for this will appear when dissecting the specific

⁴⁴ Bishop, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, 62.

case studies, certainly visible in *Early Days*. Creating an aesthetic that forefronts relationships rather than a faux experience is paramount for the political agency of contemporary political art, a point that will be clearly demonstrated in the last chapter of this thesis.

The combining thoughts of those who believe that a theatrical experience may possess the possibility of change and/or emancipation, including those of Reynolds, Bourriaud and Philip Auslander, may strive for small moments of change or cracks in the wall of capitalism. I'm further invested in the 'ways in which contemporary theatre or performance might not wholly uphold dominant values... destabilising capitalist inevitability, striving for autonomy'.⁴⁵ Contrary to the cynicism beforehand is the conviction that political theatre could still be as critical, as potentially radical, liberating or emancipatory, regardless of its palpable commodification. Auslander again embraces the possibility that overtly commodified art is potentially critical.⁴⁶ No matter the scale, it seems that any performance that can contribute to the 'evolution of wider social and political realities'⁴⁷ may be important for the future of political theatre. The instigation of social change has its roots within the work of Brecht, Piscator and Boal, however, one should be in no doubt that they hold a contemporary relevance. I will argue that aesthetic experiences are an instigator of political consciousness, opening a door to the

⁴⁵ Al-Badri, *Tony Kushner's Postmodern Theatre*, p. 22.

⁴⁶ Philip Auslander, *Presence and resistance: Postmodernism and cultural politics in contemporary American performance* (MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 3.

⁴⁷ Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance, Radical theatre as cultural intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 1.

possibility of social change. What is clear now is that the lineage presented above about the position of participatory political theatre within the perimeters of the experience economy and global capitalism presents problems for such a type of theatre. These problems will be identified in numerous ways in the following case studies.

WHO CARES

‘What’s the most important institution of the country? 48 per cent the NHS, 12 per cent Parliament, 6 per cent monarchy. So it’s sort of instinctively, when people think actually about defining who we are, it’s sort of the NHS comes quite near the top’

(Michael Wynne, *Who Cares*, London: Faber and Faber, 2015, p. 15)

The 2015 general election (7th May) provided an opportunity for the United Kingdom’s recognised political parties to present their standpoints regarding the issues that affect predominantly UK citizens, but whose permutations are felt across the globe. Debate spiralled concerning matters such as immigration, economy, welfare, education, defence and health care. This notion would be no better illustrated than by the Royal Court’s decision to stage *Who Cares* in the run-up to the general election, a piece about the fiercely contested issue of

the National Health Service (NHS), an institution described by the then Labour leadership candidate Ed Miliband as ‘fighting for its life’.¹ This chapter will look to examine the political potential of a piece of theatre about national health care, crystallised institutionally by the UK’s NHS, (*Who Cares*, 10 Apr – 16 May 2015 Royal Court). Whilst this ninety-minute promenade, political, verbatim performance may, as evidence throughout the chapter will show, seem able instigate some form of social change it may have been subject to an economisation. It would appear that an overarching system of governance is in control. Without a credible alternative and courtesy of a blurring between the cultural and the economic, *Who Cares* will be shown to better illustrate a political theatre more concerned with profit and gimmicks. This seems a long way from the ambition of famed avant-garde practitioner Antonin Artaud, one in which he strove to ‘reach audiences on the deepest physical and emotional levels – to create a theatre that would be like a shock treatment, galvanise and shock people into feeling’.² The use of the verbatim form brings into question the merits of economics vs. ethics. Specifically, the politics of verbatim vs the commodification of experience will be under analysis while the authenticity of a verbatim form within the praxis of political theatre will be questioned. Analysis will be informed by a number of sources that will help evidence how and in what way *Who Cares* offers in the way of

¹ Labour Press, *Ed Milliband: Put Your NHS First on Thursday* (2015), <http://press.labour.org.uk/post/118095997659/ed-miliband-put-your-nhs-first-on-thursday> [accessed 19 January 2016].

² Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, p. xvi.

politics and participation, respectively. Therefore, due to *Who Cares* resulting in an ineffective political experience, attention must turn to the use of form and system to see what other effects it may have on its audience. The chapter will move to look at the system that governs it, and its wider implications. Finally, I will consider how a theatrical ‘spin-doctor’ may complicate the issues on garnering agency from participatory performance due to its ability to master and manipulate proceedings. How accurately can an audience judge sincerity against artificiality? The idea of a spin-doctor maintaining a position of mastery over proceedings and their questionable truthfulness is the thematic link to this idea. This is in an effort to etch out the overarching questions on the politics of the verbatim form within the wider perimeters of the commodification of experience.

In the run-up to the general election of 2015, Charlotte Higgins argued that British theatre was becoming an alternative debating chamber.³ One of the most eminent theatrical ‘debating chambers’ of political discourse is the Royal Court, long known for its staging of topical and politically-relevant theatre. It is perhaps no coincidence that the play opened on the week that the Labour Party mounted their attack on policy surrounding the NHS. The Royal Court introduced the piece on their website by saying

³ Charlotte Higgins, ‘Theatre: the nation’s debating chamber’, *The Guardian* (6 March 2015), <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/mar/06/political-theatre-nations-debating-chamber> [accessed 10 July 2015].

The NHS belongs to us. In the run up the general election the NHS is emerging as the key issue in the party political agenda. The Royal Court is responding to that public passion and debate by staging Michael Wynne's new verbatim play *Who Cares*.⁴

With regards to national health and care, *Who Cares* is an exemplary piece of work, potentially exploiting two of the many important factors that contribute to the quality and impact of a given piece of work, those of the established reputations of Wynne and the Royal Court respectively in order to contribute to contemporary theatrical discourse on the issue. I contend that the piece of work at hand holds significant resonance. Whilst the promotion of a piece of theatre by any venue does not predicate its reception by an audience, Artistic Director Vicky Featherstone nonetheless promoted the piece as 'timely and thrilling'.⁵ Whilst the timing element of Featherstone's comment is clear to see, those 'thrilling' elements apparent in the piece will be analysed critically later in the chapter.

Wynne has enjoyed a successful career, with a host of publications and awards to his name and has an extensive working relationship with the Royal

⁴ Royal Court, *Who Cares* (2015), <http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/whats-on/nhs-test> [accessed 10 January 2016].

⁵ Sarah Jane Griffiths, *Royal Court to stage NHS play ahead of election* (2015), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-31710775> [accessed 11 October 2015].

Court. His first formal relationship with the theatre industry was shaped via the Royal Court's young playwriting competition, which Wynne won with his first piece *The Knocky* (1994), a comedy about a Birkenhead council estate. Since this piece, Wynne has contributed a number of other projects to the Royal Court including: *The Priory* (2009), *The People Are Friendly* (2002) and *Friday Night Sex* (2013). What makes *Who Cares* distinct from his earlier work is the scale of the project, requiring a large amount of time and documentation in order to collate all the necessary information to tackle such a large institution. After eighteen months of research and interviews, Wynne succeeded in condensing his findings into a marketable piece of work (from over 300 pages down to 72),⁶ utilising almost every part of the Sloane Square venue in a promenade performance style. Wynne collated the recorded thoughts of a wide range of those connected to the NHS, from paramedics to historians, cleaners to politicians. This was with the aim of '[giving] voice to unheard perspectives on this British institution's past, present and possible future'.⁷ In support of this ambitious objective, *Who Cares* called upon the professional support of three directors (Debbie Hannan, Lucy Morrison and Hamish Pirie), in recognition of the large scale of the project. Once destined to be staged in a disused hospital, the play splits into two acts, aptly named: Symptoms (Act 1) and Diagnosis (Act 2). Broken up by an actual and

⁶ Michael Wynne, *Michael Wynne on his NHS verbatim play Who Cares* (Interviewed by Matt Trueman for Theatrevoice) (7 May 2015), <http://www.theatrevoice.com/audio/michael-wynne-nhs-verbatim-play-cares/> [accessed 10 January 2015].

⁷ Royal Court, *Who Cares*.

somewhat thematically appropriate ‘tea break’ the performance journeyed around the entire Royal Court building, from office space to back corridors and meeting rooms, dressed up to resemble the familiar NHS treatment rooms one could expect, accompanied by a cohort of typically rushed NHS ‘staff members’. There are thirty-two characters in total, shared by the eight multi-role playing cast of: Philip Arditti, Martina Laird, Eileen O’Brien, Robert Bathurst, Paul Hickey, Nathaniel Martello-White, and Elizabeth Berrington. Whilst these cast members constitute the main speaking roles, there are also a number of performers who contribute as staff and patients, helping to create the often-busied mood of NHS departments. At junctures throughout the piece the audience split into three groups, taking on varying paths of looping performances, prescribed by an identifiable lanyard labelled ‘patient pathway’. However, there were moments of the audience being brought together, such as the scenes in the mock-up A & E department and NHS waiting room, vessels for arguably more significant moments in the script.

Starting in a cross meeting/rehearsal building next to the Royal Court theatre (a place simply labelled ‘The Site’) one is ushered into the hubbub of a hyper-real Accident & Emergency waiting room. This room is perhaps the most recognisable, as a place many will have, at some point, unfortunately been privy to, dressed up with the plastic chairs, posters, signs and television screens one can expect to see in such an environment. After watching a drunk couple move from a burger and chips to an amorous kiss, and hearing a number of differing opinions and insights from certain characters, the

audience is divided up into their three different groups, signified by their colour-coded lanyards. What follows this first scene, in which the entire audience is together, is a series of six different scenes around the theatre building(s). Depending on the lanyard you are prescribed with, the order in which you see these scenes are different for the three groups and take place in locations such as offices, areas outside and back stairs/rooms. These locations around the theatre space are designed to reproduce consultancy rooms, cigarette break areas, ambulance yards, GP's surgeries, finance departments, operating rooms, birthing suites and more. Once the series of six short scenes have been navigated Act One reaches its close. Following this, Marjorie (Eileen O'Brien), whose words we hear first at the start of the performance, serves the audience tea from a large urn as she divulges her personal relationship with her work and family. This scene (Tea Break) is performed in a mock maternity ward, and permits the character the time to further explain her life via a monologue. Following this somewhat welcome break to the structure, the audience is collectively taken upstairs into the theatre space for the finale of the performance. Instead of a series of short scenes that permit a journey around the space, the final act consisting of only one scene, almost a playlet in itself, is designed as a hospital ward/waiting room and asks the audience (without directly inviting this) to stay seated for the remainder of the performance. What follows in this traverse staged section is a theatricalized

debate on topics related to the NHS such as reforms, economics, government interference and the contentious Mid Staffordshire hospital scandal.⁸

As the above outline of the piece demonstrates, *Who Cares* offers an inquiry into the state of the NHS as well as probing some of the emotions that are carried with it. As the Senior Consultant states early on in the piece ‘We have an institution which is unlike any other, in that it’s an institution which actually has, sort of meaning up here (*points to head*) as well-meaning down here (*points to heart*)’.⁹ Through a selection of chosen interviews, a range of views are presented about the past, present and possible future of the institution. *Who Cares* presents a wide range of opinions. The piece in my opinion strays from the bluntness of didacticism (although I did personally find the final scene somewhat didactic in nature, and had the least enjoyment from it). Additionally, as an industry rumoured to be burdened with a politically left-wing bias, *Who Cares* does not appear to be an overtly left-leaning piece of theatre. Wynne, in an interview with Matt Trueman, jokes about becoming right-wing, in an attempt to draw a more three-dimensional view of the NHS.¹⁰ Whilst Wynne’s successes at achieving this may be a matter of opinion, what is clear is that *Who Cares* forefronts modes of the political and the experiential. The political topicality of the piece is clear from the testimonies that have been selected for inclusion within the verbatim text.

⁸ Denis Campbell, ‘Mid Staffs hospital scandal: the essential guide’, *The Guardian* (February 6, 2013) <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/feb/06/mid-staffs-hospital-scandal-guide>> [accessed 11 September 2017].

⁹ Michael Wynne, *Who Cares* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), p. 14.

¹⁰ Wynne, *Michael Wynne on his NHS verbatim play Who Cares*.

For example, references are made to the debate on the migrant issue sweeping Europe, the bias media onslaught of the NHS, or the idea of nationalism in the UK. I will be addressing specific examples throughout the chapter. The issues raised in *Who Cares* had an important role to play in the debate that surrounded the general election, their influence on culture is not to be underestimated. Airing these issues in a piece of theatre was a potentially important intervention, for example, as right wing campaigners focused on migrant issues, representing NHS immigrant employees in a positive light may have acted as a timely mediation. For example

Drunk Woman: Oh here we go. Just arrived from Heathrow. Oh yeah, come and have your baby here.

...

Porter: You're far more likely to be treated by an immigrant than to pay for the treatment of one. Especially in London.¹¹

When thinking of an election that dealt with issues of nationalism, xenophobia and racism respectively, one can draw comparisons to the rise of UKIP¹² and the relative successes of the party's 2015 electoral campaign.

¹¹ Wynne, *Who Cares*, p. 22.

¹² Lalklar, *UKIP, xenophobia and the upcoming general election* (2015), <<http://www.lalklar.org/article/2185/ukip-xenophobia-and-the-upcoming-general-election>> [accessed 19 January 2016].

Indeed, Martin Jacques suggests in his article that UKIP has been important in shaping current attitudes to issues on immigration and Europe, perhaps as important as the more established Labour Party.¹³ Further, one could identify the image of the NHS portrayed by the media, one which projected mixed messages, but often chose to demean the institution. I would argue that there are familiar moments in the text that help exemplify this, for instance the constant coverage of NHS issues on National news ‘Carl: Like I always – like whenever I’m getting ready for work I always watch breakfast telly. And they always slate the NHS, basically, every single morning’.¹⁴

As Alex Proud suggested for *The Telegraph* ‘Instead of treating the NHS as a sacred cow, and holding on to outdated notions about how good it is, we urgently need to fix it’,¹⁵ these mixed feelings are represented throughout Wynne’s text. Finally, the issue of privatisation of the NHS was an important feature of the general election discussion. Ed Miliband, whose Labour Party campaign went very much on the front foot of the NHS debate made claims of a Conservative agenda of stealth privatisation.¹⁶ These important and topical

¹³ Martin Jacques, ‘The death of neoliberalism and the crisis in western politics’, *The Guardian* (21 August 2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/21/death-of-neoliberalism-crisis-in-western-politics>> [accessed 14 January 2017].

¹⁴ Wynne, *Who Cares*, p. 25.

¹⁵ Alex Proud, ‘It’s stupid to believe that the NHS is still ‘the best in the world’’, *The Telegraph* (28 September 2015) <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/11894371/Its-stupid-to-believe-that-the-NHS-is-still-the-best-in-the-world.html>> [accessed 19 January 2016].

¹⁶ Rose Troup Buchanan, ‘General Election 2015: NHS faces ‘stealth privatisation’ under Tories, Ed Milliband claims’, *Independent* (25 April 2015) <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/generalelection/general-election-2015-nhs-faces-stealth-privatisation-under-tories-ed-miliband-claims-10203793.html>> [accessed 19 January 2016].

issues are subtly aired in the performance, with undertones of a necessary theatrical intervention, demonstrated via quotes such as

NHS Regulator: If you've got a private sector organisation that can provide care which is at least as good as an NHS organisation, for exactly the same price, and can also make a bit of profit in the process, what's the problem?¹⁷

Whilst the Conservative Party focused more on the economic problems they claimed had been caused by their Labour opposition, the Labour Party continued to press upon the Conservative's apparent agenda to sell off parts of the NHS to companies such as Virgin.

In this investigation, the performance will be scrutinised as intensely as the written text. *Who Cares* may have the potential for a political critique, done so via the seeming scrutiny of a cornerstone of British culture and society, an indisputable British institutional landmark, the NHS. However, the performance framework is hinged upon its experiential form rather than its institutional critique, which will be shown to diminish the potential of crafting social change, and instead bear more resemblance to an aesthetic commodity.

¹⁷ Wynne, *Who Cares*, p. 58.

Even a topic as professedly provocative as the NHS can, as will be demonstrated, be co-opted into the capitalist narrative and system, rendering its prospectively radical effects obsolete, whilst facilitating an arguably neoliberal agenda. Modes of participation presented in the production of *Who Cares*, I will argue, demonstrate saturated commodification.

The promise of a promenade performance is most interesting when analysing this aesthetic production: specifically, in this case, the contemporary experiential marketing of a journey throughout the Royal Court building as a ploy taken from the success of immersive theatre companies. That being said, it is important to note that the Royal Court does have its own history of experiential productions, recent and differing examples include: *Liberian Girl* (2015), *The Nether* (2014), *Gastronauts* (2013).

Theatre such as *Who Cares* exacerbates the continuing predicament of political theatre that relies on the production of experience as its plausible unique selling point or indeed its *raison d'être*. Ostensibly, *Who Cares* should represent an inquiry into the state and political predicament of the NHS.

However, the harnessing of experience to the verbatim model only seeks to complicate this issue. The Royal Court website describes the piece, saying ‘In a promenade performance audiences will be led around intimate spaces by a cast of professional actors’.¹⁸ The chance to be physically taken around the theatre’s ‘intimate’ spaces may play a large role in the commercial success of

¹⁸ Royal Court, *Who Cares*.

the piece. The same techniques used in immersive forms of theatre have been utilised for this verbatim model of political theatre. Examples of this include the sensory act of moving, or the freedom to move within a given space, in a similar vein to the work of companies such as Punchdrunk. This, as Alston notes¹⁹ is a distinguishing feature of immersive art forms, but does not exclude text-based practice, and is in fact the primary source of the experiential present within *Who Cares*. Moving around the theatre building enables the audience to experience a palpable journey, led by trained actors and often observed by other spectators. *Who Cares*' scattered performance structure and engagement with the hidden backstage landscape of the theatre further locates the piece as one working within the parameters of immersive theatre practice. When considering the importance of journey based participatory moments of experience, White notes how 'The attractions of these spaces are obvious: they provide ready-made exploratory landscapes... into which performances can be scattered, and in which engagement with the environment can be an important part of the audience experience'.²⁰ The results are the selling of an experience paramount to commercial needs, which, as I demonstrated in chapter two, can be aligned to the wider, neoliberal experience economy. Despite the politically potent subject matter, this is inserted into an increasingly prevalent model, therefore, performances such as *Who Cares* are now created at an advancing rate for a production line of participating cultural consumers. Commenting

¹⁹ Alston, 'Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value', 129.

²⁰ White, 'On Immersive Theatre', p. 223.

explicitly on such a performance type, sometimes referred to as a ‘pass through performance’, Alston notes that ‘while experience itself is uniquely tied to the experiencing subject, the theatrical machine through which they pass remains both stable and productive of comparable experiences for an indefinite number of cultural consumers’.²¹ Providing this form of experiential production to vast cohorts of cultural consumers is an example of how economically successful this style of theatre can be.

Who Cares, then, may be seen to benefit further the commercial needs of the theatre industry rather than advancing the emancipatory agenda of political theatre. This agenda is not the only agenda within political theatre, but important to political theatre history and under analysis when thinking of theatre and its relationship to capitalism. As an amalgamation of art forms, a cross immersive/political/verbatim piece of theatre, the performance is certainly an academically topical and commercially popular choice. This being said, the co-optation of performances such as *Who Cares* by the corporate sector is no more clearly substantiated than by the presence of the experiential within the performance. As Alston notes, a theatre of experience (which is the participatory theatre that utilises the senses) has a compatibility with the experience industry, evidencing a co-optation. He posits that ‘Commercial enterprise can consequently emerge to profit from pleasure

²¹ Adam Alston, ‘Reflections on Intimacy and Narcissism in Ontroerend Goed’s Personal Trilogy’, *Performing Ethos: An International Journal of Ethics in Theatre & Performance*, 3(2) (2012), 107-119, 113.

seeking'²² such as the now popular pleasure of observing or journeying around the intimate and often previously hidden performance spaces and venues.

Petsche references Jameson when he discusses the transformation of tension into a 'pleasure' or 'thrill', he notes that such a transformation contributes to the 'shallow sensory experiences'²³ of art (such as the journey around 'hidden' spaces), and propagates an understanding of the 'aestheticization of the commodity', a point that will be returned to later on in the chapter.

Throughout the detailed research process, none of the critics who commented on *Who Cares* (too numerous to list) suggested an inkling of an emancipatory response, nor a change in consciousness, nor a provocation of social or political action. Of course citing critics is a strategy full of caveats. Critics often write to entertain, with a deadline in mind, and a word count to adhere to. Furthermore, they often fail to understand the complexity and diversity of an audience, as well as differing viewing positions of collective and individual responses.²⁴ However, because of the lack of writing upon the piece, I draw upon only a few critics in order to help draw out public perception on the performance. With these thoughts in mind, the only critical response of note is that the piece had some kind of vague political weighting, they could broadly describe the piece as 'political', but offer little in the way of exactly how, which may be credit to Wynne's ability to condense a range of

²² Alston, 'Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value', 135.

²³ Petsche, 'The Importance of Being Autonomous', 149.

²⁴ Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, p. 8-10.

polemic interviews into a ninety-minute performance. Instead of impressing a political message upon its audience, it would seem that Hillaert's response to the broad performance type holds more resonance. He adds that,

In the entire performance, experience no longer serves a theatrical purpose, but the theatre frame purely serves the special experience of this event. Any ethical considerations of what we see are buried. It is precisely the primacy of sheer consumption and all its effects in contemporary society which is at the heart.²⁵

It would appear that *Who Cares* fits within this description. *Who Cares* exemplifies a performance in which the theatre frame serves the special experience, leaving critics such as Sally Carter excited that she 'got to see areas of the theatre that [she] didn't know existed'²⁶ rather than provoked by the content or message apparent in the piece, for example stimulating textual instants in *Who Cares* such as 'Why aren't the public bothered?'²⁷ or 'If you're going to stop doing stuff, which do you choose? Keep looking after dementia patients at home or stop doing fertility treatment?'²⁸ It is my opinion

²⁵ Hillaert, '(Long) live the experience', 434.

²⁶ Sally Carter, 'Sally Carter and Emily Parish review Who Cares?', *The BMJ*, <<http://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2015/05/08/sally-carter-and-emma-parish-review-who-cares/>> [accessed 11 January 2016].

²⁷ Wynne, *Who Cares*, p. 61.

²⁸ Wynne, *Who Cares*, p. 37.

that critics such as Sally Carter resonated with the experiential illusion and enjoyment to the point that the political message was seemingly secondary. Yet in light of Hillaert's views, *Who Cares* may be seen as an advert for the primacy of sheer consumption, that of the consumption of commodity via the given aestheticisation.

Whilst *Who Cares* is a prescient piece of work, it is a saturated commodity, an economised experiential endeavour under a system of capitalism able to co-opt and sublimate any potential emancipatory message Wynne had crafted in content.

Freshwater comments on a particular model of participatory theatre (through the work of *Blast Theory*) that 'the model of interaction presented is one in which freedom to choose is profoundly compromised by the limitations of the system in which choices are made'.²⁹ I would care to suggest the same applies to the model discussed in this chapter. The rigid structure designed by the *Who Cares* theatre makers does not align with the notion of empowering its audience, instead it evidences the lack of agency within a prescribed system. This kind of participation, as Elizabeth Swift comments, 'may invite the spectator's involvement, but it also entangles them in immersive processes over which they have little control because the possibilities for their participation are so circumscribed by the machinery of the productions'.³⁰

²⁹ Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, p. 70.

³⁰ Elizabeth Swift, *Negotiating the Possible Worlds of Uninvited Guests' Make Better Please: A Hypertextual Experience*, ed. James Frieze, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 104.

Who Cares may epitomise a biopsy on an unhealthy form of art rather than NHS. As Freshwater suggests, and as I will now explore, the cause for this ill health may be a consequence of the institutions' relationship with an impending system of global capitalism.

'The system decides'

The concept of 'the system', which will be presented in all three case studies, is particularly applicable to an insight into the mechanisms behind *Who Cares*. The Royal Court performance is able to pre-subscribe its moments of participation, certainly its interactive quality of journeying around the theatre venue, as and when it permits its audience to do so via a patient lanyard, fixed route and performance structure. This is not like all other performances that fall within the remit of immersive theatre. In contrast, in some of these alternative immersive performances an audience's journey and movement around the theatre space which are often vast and expansive sets, are not prescribed. Let us consider for instance the work of Punchdrunk, who have been thoroughly discussed in contemporary discourse, notably by Alston. In Punchdrunk performances, there is often no comparable 'patient pathway', nor a designated performance journey or host. Neither is there often a notable trajectory. Therefore, enforcing systematic formalities upon an audience is not

endemic of theatre companies employing experiential strategies in their work. To return, conforming to this system, essentially doing/participating as one is told to do, validates the participatory vehicle on offer, thus reducing the possibility of any further interrogative, critical and certainly emancipatory effects. As Frieze notes on voting when invited to, specifically about the next case study *Fight Night* 'The mechanisms that have allowed us to engage seem to have blocked any chance of changing the terms of engagement'.³¹ Even an unquestionably provocative subject such as the NHS would seem to be undermined via the illusion of participating with the political subject matter rather than a sensory stimulation. Instead, the system creates a superficial physical journey for its audience around the Royal Court building, including those enticing 'hidden spaces' in the theatre venue, concluding in what Alex Sierz attributes to a 'gimmicky promenade production'.³² Consequently, the subject matter of the experience is rendered a site of aesthetic engagement, potentially detracting from any critical engagement with the idea that the NHS may be 'the best gift the British people have given to themselves'³³ and instead exhibiting the consumption of commodity rather than liberating political consciousness.

Commercial success, it would appear, is a highly important success indicator, again exerting the influence of a capitalist system. In the midst of

³¹ Frieze, 'Beyond the Zero-Sum Game', 220-221.

³² Alex Sierz, *Who Cares, Royal Court* (review of 'Who Cares' (Royal Court, London) by (Debbie Hannan, Lucy Morrison and Hamish Pirie), (16 April 2015).

³³ Wynne, *Who Cares*, p. 16.

mass commercialisation and commodification, not only are the emancipatory efforts of political theatre sometimes rendered obsolete, but the quality of artistic works within the genre of political theatre are said to have suffered also. However, the commodified and commercial infiltration of political theatre, one based upon experience, has not gone unobserved. Sierz describes Wynne's piece as a

verbatim account of the National Health Service (NHS) – always a central issue in any British election – whose charming promenade production couldn't disguise the piece's weakness as drama. Gimmicks have taken over from political content.³⁴

It is exactly this 'gimmicky' performance type that may detract from the original ideals of political theatre. With the gimmick of a physical journey taking precedence over any potential political journey, I would collude with Sierz who is wary of political performances such as *Who Cares* seemingly having 'nothing original to say'.³⁵ With this in mind, what could *Who Cares* possibly achieve for the genre of political theatre? Furthermore, if the piece

³⁴ Alex Sierz, 'Backpages 25.4: New Writing the UK 2015 – A Mid-Year Overview', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 25(4) (2015), 590-599, 591.

³⁵ Sierz, 'Backpages 25.4', 591.

does have nothing original to say, how could the goal of emancipation via the form ever expect to be achieved? One possible viewing position of *Who Cares* is that it offers its audience a shallow experience, illustrated ultimately by the marketable ‘thrill’ of walking around the theatre building, Wynne himself noting in interview that ‘It’s that real immersive quality which is really exciting’.³⁶ Petsche surmises Jameson’s position on this problematical notion when detailing

The transformation from tension into ‘pleasure’ or ‘thrill’ explicates the reason for the shallow sensory experiences of art... Any ‘aspects of liberation’ that may exist in a work of art can easily become repressed and sublimated into a form of ‘thrill’ amidst the aestheticization of the commodity.³⁷

As is now evident ‘contemporary works of art have often lost the ability to shock or disturb the status quo’.³⁸ Unable to circumvent the societal structure afforded to it, art, moreover politicised art, is merely adopted by the system of global capitalism. Therefore, seemingly ineffective works of political theatre

³⁶ Wynne, *Michael Wynne on his NHS verbatim play Who Cares*.

³⁷ Petsche, ‘The Importance of Being Autonomous’, 149.

³⁸ Petsche, ‘The Importance of Being Autonomous’, 146.

such as *Who Cares* may enjoy commercial success, but their successes in light of political theatre's idealised agenda is scarcely visible, if present at all. Of course, the piece is ostensibly political. Its content is quite obviously interested in politics, evidenced at numerous points throughout this analysis. As political content carries the potential to advance an agenda of political theatre, the positioning of the work within neoliberal structure creates a simultaneous *pas de deux* between progression and repression. Looking holistically, I would argue that *Who Cares*, a piece about the UK's most cherished yet fervently debated national institution, results in an aesthetic more in favour of commodity consumption, instead of being a piece involved with contemporary politics, evidencing its regression.

Differing conclusions such as the sharing of a common goal or collective personality for an audience, perhaps more applicable to performances such as *Who Cares*, could act as a distraction from the supposed resolve of works within the genre of political theatre, preventing an audience from 'using their fraternity to change social conditions'.³⁹ In *Who Cares* the common goals: touring the themed building, furthering the collective personality of a unified patient, observer, or critic to the information and debate on the NHS. As the audience is informed, they fail to be granted a tangible opportunity to express their potential desire to *do* something about it.

³⁹ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 261.

Inducing a political consciousness or inspiring political action may require a reassessment of the term ‘political’ itself, a term that is mentioned in the introduction as fraught with ambiguity and complications, and indeed one that deserves a much further analysis than afforded in this investigation.

In closing, on various levels the system of capitalism is dictating and co-opting the genre of political theatre. Instead of hoped for emancipation, the advances of capitalism have set up more sophisticated subjugation techniques.

The problem with the artistic ‘spin-doctor’

More than one of the chosen case studies exemplify a meticulous mastery of words, scripted with precision for a desired effect. While other case studies will also show this, *Who Cares* presents a hidden form of curation, one ridden with ethical and practical complications. This is courtesy of the use of form, in this instance the form of verbatim. There are a number of definitions to this term, and indeed many ways to describe the form. For the purpose of clarity, I will use Deidre Heddon’s partial definition of the term, which broadly describes ‘a form of theatre which places interviews with people at the heart of its process’.⁴⁰ Verbatim theatre has enjoyed a consistent popularity and

⁴⁰ Dierdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 127.

growing commercial trajectory, resulting in its now frequent appearance on the UK's mainstream and alternative theatre circuits. Sierz claimed that 'In the 2000s, it [verbatim theatre] was a market leader in the decade's revival of political theatre. Its popularity might be due to a hunger in audiences for factual truth, theatre's answer to reality TV, when what you see is not fiction at all'.⁴¹ This belief is furthered when the form is described as 'deeply fashionable'.⁴² David Watt further notes this popularity when indicating that 'Googling "verbatim theatre" produces 1,020,000 hits in 0.18 seconds'.⁴³ Furthermore, the form has significant links with the genre of political theatre, hence its applicability to the current investigation. I would argue that a large amount of verbatim work carries a politico-social agenda. Contemporary works of verbatim theatre are often thematically political, examples include: *The Colour of Justice* (Tricycle Theatre, 1999) a play about the case of Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent inquiry, *Stuff Happens* (National Theatre, 2004) a performance surrounding Tony Blair and the war in Iraq, *Guantanamo* (Tricycle Theatre, 2004) a play about the detention centre Guantanamo Bay. As Heddon notes 'stories told in verbatim dramas have social significance and are politically timely'.⁴⁴ This could be no better illustrated than a piece critiquing, or at least orientated around the NHS in the

⁴¹ Alex Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*. (London: Methuen, 2011), p. 58.

⁴² Charlotte Higgins, 'National rediscovers politics', *The Guardian* (7 October 2004), <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2004/oct/07/politicaltheatre.theatre>> [accessed 19 February 2016].

⁴³ David Watt, *Political Performances Theory and Practice*. ed. by Susan C. Haedicke, Deirdre Heddon, Avraham Oz and E. J. Westlake (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. 190.

⁴⁴ Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, p. 124.

run up to a general election.

However, whilst this admired model of performance is producing commercial and critical success, much is to be questioned in regards to its ethics. Chris Megson and Alison Forsyth explore modes of documentary and verbatim theatre in their seminal work.⁴⁵ This work shapes much of the current academic discourse on verbatim theatre today, specifically questions of authenticity and agency of the form within today's culture. Particularly, Megson and Forsyth permit verbatim theatre to be analysed as an 'embattled site of contestation',⁴⁶ no longer seen as unimpeachable like previous documentary forms, instead open to ethical challenge, something done in this paper. Alternatively, Janelle Reinelt talks of the 'potential explanatory power of performance to shape ideas, question truth claims, survey public opinion, and construct an aesthetic that sometimes functions as an epistemology'.⁴⁷ She further argues that spectators may come to a verbatim theatrical event assuming the performance is linked to a reality they aim to experience or understand.⁴⁸ All of these ideas, specifically the created aesthetic and its supposed reality are under dissection in this chapter, as a site of contestation, verbatim performances that question potential truths are of significance. Political theatre, in my opinion, requires these sites of contestation, however,

⁴⁵ Chris Megson, and, Alison Forsyth, eds., *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁴⁶ Megson, and, Forsyth, eds., *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, p. 3.

⁴⁷ Janelle Reinelt, *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama*, ed. by Nadine Holdsworth and Mary Luckhurst (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013), p. 211.

⁴⁸ Reinelt, *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama*, p. 9.

if the site of contestation is shrouded in ethical concerns, how effective can it be, is critique not merely based on falsehood? Stephen Bottoms tracks the trends of verbatim theatre in his work⁴⁹ and traces some of the pitfalls associated with the verbatim form. *Who Cares* falls into some of the traps Bottoms lists in his research. Whilst seeming to demonstrate transparency, the piece is not reflexive of the realities of the content at hand, and instead could be accused of being manipulative of material. *Who Cares* to my mind does not ostensibly accept it is representing information, as it is superficially a series of verbatim interviews, and therefore may prevent a critical engagement on the depicted events and dialogue. Unfortunately, there is not scope to delve into more of the arguments on the ethics of verbatim practice, moreover, the detailed arguments delivered by the critics mentioned above, however their influence on discourse, and my own analysis, should be recognised. Moreover, without a working framework of how to effectively monitor the ethical issues raised by verbatim theatre, working through all of its ethical issues may be an immeasurable task. This being said, given that *Who Cares* could potentially shape ideas (such as discourse on the NHS, a divisive political issue), one should be aware of aspects of verbatim theatre's ethical implications, specifically the notion of truthfulness and manipulation over material, to what extent is the material authentic? Further, what authority has been granted in order for the practitioner to speak on behalf of others? Marianne Jørgensen

⁴⁹ Stephen Bottoms, 'Putting the Document into Documentary', TDR: The Drama Review, 50(3) (Fall 2006), 56-68.

and Louise Phillips, note that ‘our ways of talking do not neutrally reflect our world, identities and social relations but, rather, play an active role in creating and changing them’.⁵⁰ *Who Cares* may possess an active role in reflecting views and hard facts on the NHS, therefore, any potential influence, moreover mendacious influence, amongst other ethical issues is of importance. As Carol Martin suggests, verbatim performances ‘will seem to be “getting at the truth” or “telling another set of lies”’.⁵¹ Whilst identifying fabrication amongst seemingly authentic personal recounts may be somewhat impossible, it is important not to forget the role of the author, who is tasked with curating and manipulating material for a desired effect, whether that be for personal, political, artistic or other varying motivations. For instance, Alecky Blythe, author of various pieces including critically acclaimed *London Road* (2011) recounted upon her writing processes that ‘Eventually I lowered the level of truth on the gauge and started buying into heightened dramatic narrative’.⁵² This quote may illustrate the issue of economics vs. ethics. Ultimately, Blythe may have opted for commercial assurance in heightened dramatic narrative, over the level of truth provided to her audience, however I am aware that artistic intention is not always to secure profitability. For political theatre however, this shows how the commercial needs of the theatre industry may contradict ethical principles, although, editing is often required, and perhaps

⁵⁰ Marianne Jørgensen, and, Louise Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2002), p. 1.

⁵¹ Carol Martin, ‘Bodies of Evidence’, *The Drama Review: TDR*, 50(3) (2006), 8-15, 14.

⁵² Alecky Blythe, *Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*. ed. by Will Hammond and Dan Steward (London: Oberon Books, 2008), p 44.

not the boldest ethical contrast. Certainly, *Who Cares*' overtly commercial and commodified verbatim aesthetic, alongside the omitting of potential truths, does little to support the ideal of emancipation of an audience and the potential breaching of capitalism. For example, these truths could be the precursory questions posed to the selected interviewees, as the editing of the piece includes a series of statements or answers. So, I would ask, how was the question worded? Surely the way that a question is asked often denotes how it is to be answered, and we are not privy to the truth of the initial question. Further, how does one balance representing the truth against creating an entertaining piece of theatre? This of course does not always mean 'selling out'.

Verbatim theatre assesses the demand for a supposedly 'real' experience, dependent upon its status as a truthful form of theatre. Whilst this is a different kind of experience, it is no less of a commodified experience as those identified previously in this investigation. As David Lane states, 'our culture is saturated in serving our desire for the "real" experience, reaffirming that conditions for verbatim theatre are perhaps better than ever'.⁵³ What is paramount to this investigation is that the presence of saturated commodification is again visible within the genre of political theatre. Concurrently, the use of verbatim form highlights the political relevance of curating and manipulating words/persona. Whilst I am hesitant to charge

⁵³ David Lane, *Contemporary British Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 64.

Wynne, or indeed the piece itself as mendacious, some comment on this is warranted. I cannot say what Wynne's version of the truth is, and indeed, I would argue *Who Cares* appears to be an amalgam of opinion rather than a polemic version of any particular truth. However, Wynne as an author could be personified in this analogy as the 'spin-doctor', who can curate and manipulate material to his desired effect, a topical analogy due to the political nature of the work at hand. Wynne is just one example of a verbatim theatre practitioner that may 'present only another 'version' of the truth: the one they want us to hear'.⁵⁴ One cannot, and should not, underestimate Wynne's mediation over the text. As Thomas Couser notes when discussing 'life writing', 'when mediation is ignored, the resulting text may be (mis)taken for a transparent lens through which we have direct access to its subject (rather than to its author)'.⁵⁵

Verbatim or 'word for word' theatre could be seen as a truthful and/or authentic form of theatre (although often criticised for exactly the opposite), given that the text is frequently comprised of recorded comments from interviewees. As Lane states, 'Problematically, verbatim theatre often carries a promise to present the unmediated truth, "not merely a version but the version of what occurred", a promise that it cannot hope to achieve'.⁵⁶ As is now

⁵⁴ Lane, *Contemporary British Drama*, p. 66.

⁵⁵ Thomas Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 38.

⁵⁶ Lane, *Contemporary British Drama*, p. 66.

evident, the form probes an inquiry into its supposed truthfulness based on an understanding of its economic vs. ethical implications.

Similarly, the notion of ethics, specifically deception within the political sphere is widely uttered and recognised in public perception of UK politics. Indeed, it is proffered by direct quotes from politicians themselves, such as Peter Mandelson, who famously noted: ‘Our job is to create the truth’.⁵⁷ Examples of duplicity are referenced thoroughly by political commentators such as Peter Osborne (source used in above quote) and Owen Jones.⁵⁸ One could suggest that the wariness of verbatim’s truth telling facilities resonate with that of contemporary politicians, who could (and rightly should) be telling the truth, but, are often attacked for the opposite, providing an ethical comparison.

Verbatim theatre does not operate outside the commercial and commodified remit of an experience economy prevalent within the structures of capitalism. Instead, verbatim theatre acts as an obvious component of the commodification of experience present within the genre of political theatre.

Who Cares; about Political Theatre’s future

⁵⁷ Peter Osborne, *The Rise of Political Lying* (London: The Free Press, 2005), p. 3.

⁵⁸ Owen Jones, *The Establishment* (London: Penguin Books, 2014).

Who Cares exposes certain risks for other works that adopt the cross verbatim and immersive form. In this example, its reliance on commodity-saturated modes of the experiential characterise its critical redundancy. Therefore, one could ask what form of contemporary theatre would be most apt in striving for social change. As Rebecca Hillman examines

Does ongoing political activism, and the socio-economic and political circumstances of the past century still resonating today mean that there is still a place for a theatre that seeks to instigate change? And if so, what forms of theatre would be most effective at doing so?⁵⁹

Whilst political theatre may hold the potential to instigate change it ‘tends to be couched in terms of decline and failure’,⁶⁰ rather than noted for its efficacy, something notoriously hard to measure. In addition, Joe Kelleher attacks not only political theatre, but theatre’s wider ability to create change as an institution, he comments that ‘theatre’s instrumentalism [and] use as a means of guiding our actions and changing the world, does not work – never did

⁵⁹ Hillman, ‘(Re)constructing Political Theatre’, 383.

⁶⁰ Hillman, ‘(Re)constructing Political Theatre’, 380.

[and] never will'.⁶¹ This damning rhetoric vilifies not only the genre of political theatre, but the political potential of an entire industry. However, Kelleher's provocation does evoke an inquiry into what form, if at all any, may be best in theatre's emancipatory plight.

Evidently, popular forms of political theatre, those including the utilisation of forms of immersion, verbatim and the experiential are the most emblematic of the current manifestations of political theatre. Analysing these within the perimeters of society and specifically commercialisation is no revolutionary concept; the genre of political theatre has been scrutinised for some decades. Eric Bentley suggested that the theatre as an institution was wrongly assumed as an instigator of social change, when in fact theatre is an 'institution that has very little effect on politics'.⁶² However, in an era where capitalism appears an impenetrable fortress, contemporary political theatre can either assume things will never change, or try to influence like the political theatre of the past.⁶³

In the next chapter, I will suggest that perhaps a different utilisation of experience would benefit further the aims of political theatre. This experience is not akin to the believed 'real' experience of verbatim theatre, nor the tangible experience of journeying around a theatre building or participating with a performance. This is an experience that arouses a critical sense,

⁶¹ Joe Kelleher, *Theatre and Politics*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 57.

⁶² Eric Bentley, 'The Political Theatre Reconsidered', *The Kenyon Review*, 23(1) (1961), 77.

⁶³ Tiffany Jenkins, 'Debating Political Theatre', *The Scotsman*, (18 November 2013), <<http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/theatre/tiffany-jenkins-debating-political-theatre-1-3192976>> [accessed 29 October 2015].

instigates a political consciousness and ultimately may strive towards the emancipation of its audience. Elaine Aston, who comments on the powerful work of Caryl Churchill surmises this point in a poignant vernacular, she notes about Churchill's work that it represents a 'process of reasoning toward an arousal of critical senses or sensibilities – or effecting a visceral, experiential wake-up call designed to bring us to our political senses' these words are applicable to the subject matter at hand. This is achieved by contrasting to the 'capitalist business of making "serious money"', and instead concentrated on an agenda to 'produce other kinds of social and cultural value... vital that the "experience" it affords is one that realizes a politically effective afterlife'.⁶⁴

Alarming, the modes of experience offered as examples in *Who Cares* suggest little towards a political afterlife (again, a troublesome idea to physically substantiate), but rather, its primary concern is the commercial demand of capitalist business, situated within an economised framework, a facet of global capitalism. The social value of political theatre may lie in its ability to provide an alternative, as it did do historically. Perhaps an experiential wake up call, as Aston rhetoric suggests, is the momentary breach an alternative requires. However, its form, feasibility and actuality are matters to be further questioned when considering experience as anything more than an advocate of commodity consumption, neoliberal ethos and global capitalism.

⁶⁴ Elaine Aston, 'But Not That: Caryl Churchill's Political Shape Shifting at the Turn of the Millennium', *Modern Drama*, 56(2) (2013), 145-164, 157.

Who Cares may exhibit the façade of a timely and prescient piece of political theatre. It was aired at a potent time to be highlighting potential weaknesses in the NHS. The written text boasts an image of a proud NHS flag at full mast on the front cover, whilst the performance caused theatre critics to implore contemporary politicians as its audience. However, the impact of the piece was somewhat neutralised by its mode of performance framing and wider context. *Who Cares* does not mirror some of the bold agendas political theatre is may to advocate. This is courtesy of the production of an aesthetic, an overtly economised aesthetic including components of immersivity and participation. The performance manipulates its audience and packages them into roles already scripted for them. Forebodingly for this investigation, the system decides, both practically and in a wider metaphorical sense. Furthermore, a ‘breakdown’ (see Foster pg. 145) between the cultural and economic realms obfuscates issues, leaving examples such as *Who Cares* in a tumultuous quandary. The pursuit of profit has only served to aggrandise gimmicks, leaving this example of political theatre inoffensive and ineffective. The ‘political’ concurrently appears to have been both normalised and shrouded in inexactness, both of which only seek to support the advances of a capitalist agenda. Moreover, the verbatim form draws illuminating parallels between theatre and politics, specifically the role of the ‘spin doctor’ and the manifestation of manipulation and mendacity in both aspects respectively.

Who Cares is a stark example of a potentially impotent form of theatre, an institution that needs a vehement re-understanding of experience, alongside

a reassessment of its relationship with capitalism if it is to accurately critique global capitalism and emancipate its audience. As the Junior Doctor says in *Who Cares* ‘The problem – the fundamental problem of the Health Service, it’s a victim of its own success’,⁶⁵ so too must the theatre industry look to see what problems have developed from a commercially successful form of art.

⁶⁵ Wynne, *Who Cares*, p. 17.

FIGHT NIGHT

‘Winners stay, losers leave the stage. The audience votes, the system decides’
(Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, London: Oberon Books, 2014, p. 458)

Belgian theatre company Ontroerend Goed has enjoyed a consistent popularity for its varied and provocative theatrical performances. Founded in 1994, the company has presented its work across an international platform and are well known to its UK audience. Ontroerend Goed presents a diverse range of forms in its work ranging from immersive performances such as *Internal* (2009), to one-to-one performances such as *The Smile Off Your Face* (2013).

Importantly, Ontroerend Goed’s work repeatedly forefronts both the political and the experiential features that will be scrutinised throughout this analysis.

Darryn King testifies to the extremes of the company’s work, he notes that

even for a hardened theatre critic, anticipating a production from Belgian company Ontroerend Goed is an exhilarating agony, a feeling somewhere between waiting for a blind date and a dental appointment. These are shows in which audience members have been seduced, deceived, betrayed, and bullied. They have been blindfolded, scrutinized and spied on, kissed passionately and pitted against one another.¹

The Ghent-based company is a persistent facilitator of contemporary theatrical and political debate, never too far away from mild controversy. This is no better illustrated than the reception of its recent project *Fight Night* on its UK tour in 2015. Radosavljevic comments that

Sometimes disarmingly benevolent, sometimes deliberately provocative, Ontroerend Goed's work is nevertheless manipulative, and in the best way possible. In the way that art will always be, inevitably.²

¹ Darryn King, 'The Hot Seat', *The Australian* (8 January 2015) <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/the-hot-seat/story-fn9n8gph-1226847141304>> [accessed 15 December 2015].

² Radosavljevic, *The Machinery of Democracy*.

Fight Night is an interactive performance that follows a round by round voting structure to find a prevailing candidate in a changing, demographic and seemingly democratic political system. The production asks participants to vote on issues related to them, and ultimately for the candidate and system that they feel best represents them.

This analysis will seek to situate *Fight Night* as a work of political theatre through the lens of experience and subsequently its position within contemporary society. I will go on to illuminate *Fight Night*'s conflicting political aspects, including its complicity within commodity culture as well as its credentials as an advocate of some form of social change. Ultimately, I will assess in what ways *Fight Night* possesses a form of agency against the overarching system by which it is governed, albeit within a structure allowing for limited agentive behaviour. I will suggest that *Fight Night*'s ability to mirror direct action helps expose the flaws of contemporary democracy. Further, I will show how manipulation over material provides ethical concerns and a blockade in the way of political potential.

According to the company, the actual inspiration for the performance is born from a reaction to a Belgian election campaign. It has had successful runs in Hong Kong and has also been translated into a Turkish version. Nonetheless, its narrative, use of voting systems, and political symbolism holds credence across a multitude of democratic systems. Specifically,

thinking of voting within a European context, Marilena Zaroulia and Philip Hager pose some important questions:

How can voting... be a threat? Are there 'greater' or 'lesser' votes?
Who votes? How do they vote? What can voting achieve in the
changing European context, amidst ongoing and multifaceted financial,
socio-political and ideological crises? What versions of Europe and/or
representative democracy are rehearsed in times of election? And what
perspective on these acts of representation might be offered by theatre
and performance studies?³

Clearly, voting is a complex and varied issue, certainly not one to be
unheeded, and one that will can be analysed in brief using *Fight Night* and the
2015 UK general election as its focus. In the case of *Fight Night*, the
performance exemplifies the relationship between theatre and politics,
capitalising on the shared ground the two areas often enjoy. However, it is the
prescient timing of the piece that adds significance to the performance and its
potential effects, running just before the UK general election. *Fight Night* is
more than a piece of theatre about how and why we vote. Vicky Frost from

³ Marilena Zaroulia, and, Philip Hager, eds., 'Acts of Voting: A Lexicon', *Contemporary Theatre Review, Interventions*, 25(2) (2015), n.p.

The Guardian writes that ‘Fight Night is an interactive production that examines how and why we make judgments about others, asks whether the political system really represents our choices, and offers us some solutions for reforming it’.⁴ Others have also recognised a wider political and societal reference. In fact, many propose that *Fight Night* is a critical illustration or parody of countless national voting systems, ranging from Belgium to Hong Kong to Australia.^{5/6}

On entering the Unicorn Theatre auditorium, we (the audience) are handed a personal electronic device, a numerical voting pad numbered 1 – 9, which, as our host informs us is to be used throughout the performance in order to register our preferences. This keypad permits a discrete and democratic form of voting. Our preferences are to be displayed digitally (at times) on some screens fitted above the stage via the use of charts and percentages. The performance followed the same blueprint structure; each actor could easily change from one role to another depending on the votes of the audience. *Fight Night* is a largely scripted piece of work, with as much as 75% of the script is learnt prior to the performance, the remaining 25% at the mercy of varying voting patterns of the audience. Given that the voting drives the narrative, the

⁴ Vicky Frost, ‘Fight Night review – ‘it pushes us to admit to being racist, sexist and violent’’, *Guardian* (13 March 2014) <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/australia-culture-blog/2014/mar/14/fight-night-review-it-pushes-us-to-admit-to-being-racist-sexist-and-violent>> [accessed 15 December 2015].

⁵ Frost, ‘Fight Night review’.

⁶ Vanessa Assarasakorn, ‘‘Reality theatre’ Fight Night – a democracy game show’, *South China Morning Post* (25 February 2015) <<http://www.scmp.com/magazines/48hrs/article/1722359/reality-theatre-fight-night-democracy-game-show>> [accessed 16 December 2015].

performance I witnessed may differ largely to others. Therefore, this brief synopsis represents only one performance. I draw also on the written text.

The *Fight Night* stage is rather bare, resembling a boxing ring without its usual boundary of ropes. This boxing theme may perpetuate the impression of combat. Combat in the political sphere is an ongoing and inevitable part of elections. After a quick test of the device and an initial data-gathering exercise on audience demographic, the performance, hosted by a well-attired compere begins its journey. By now, we have been introduced to the actors, the original cast made up of Angelo Tijssens, Sophie Cleary, David Heinrich, Roman Vaculik and Charlotte De Bruyne, the candidates who will be competing for our votes throughout the course of the evening. In a round-by-round format, our decisions impact on which candidates remain within the mechanisms of the performance and which ones leave the stage, not to return. This starts by choosing a candidate based on looks, but develops into a much more mature investigation into politics and democracy as the show progresses. The winner and loser of this initial looks-based vote have the opportunity to address the audience, and one can start to understand how the decisions made on the keypad affect the workings of the performance. As the show advances, our candidates take on specific political stances, pitching their views to the electorate through speeches and declarations as the quest for a prevailing candidate unravels and evolves. There are five rounds in total, perhaps resembling the five candidates we encounter. The use of rounds, together with the staging and early boxer costume reiterate the ‘Fight Night’ theme to the

piece. Each round has its own unique purpose, and often its own sub-rounds within each overarching round. For clarity, I will briefly list the purpose of each of the five rounds as individually introduced within the written text:

- 1) In which the audience gets a first impression of the five candidates, a winner and a loser emerge and campaigning starts.
- 2) In which the audience eliminates one candidate, but not the one they expected, and the system starts to have its way with direct democracy.
- 3) In which the four remaining candidates are subjected to a blind round of voting concerning social, political and philosophical issues.
- 4) In which campaigning takes the form of a talk show, the surviving candidates present their spin-doctored personality and the host changes the game.
- 5) In which the candidates try to make you agree, disagree or stop voting⁷

As the candidates start to be eliminated from the ‘game’ at hand in front of us, naturally, given the work of Ontroerend Goed, this is accompanied by a wealth of intricacies, twists and turns in plot. For example, a candidate close to eviction proposes the forming of a coalition, in order to save themselves. At another point, our host decides he wants to now run for election. Here we can see how the company aim to provoke its audience, questioning the validity, or

⁷ Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, London: Oberon Books, 2014.

changing the outcome, of an audience's intended vote. The ongoing voting process in the middle rounds also causes an audience to question itself. How does an audience feel about certain words, for example 'Nigger' and 'Faggot', how would they best describe themselves, what are their honest ideas and attitudes towards religious, social, or ethical issues? Again, perhaps there is a thrill to this given moment, almost like a personal quiz, where answers effect the outcome. As the performance continues to whittle down its candidates, we are faced with the proposition that we could abstain from voting. Not only this, but we can give over our voting device, and even occupy the stage as a form of protest to the system at hand given that for many, including me, the choices and candidate available no longer represents our best wishes. This is arguably the biggest decision of the night, as the offer of a real rebellion starts to emerge (albeit still within the choices of the game), this example will be later noted for its possible agency. At the same time, our opposition voters can dictate whether or not we are permitted to carry on in the process, there is even a call to remove us from the auditorium itself. As a winner emerges, one that either validates or attacks the system at hand, we are given a breakdown of what this winning majority vote looks like in terms of:

- Sex.
- Relationship status.
- Beliefs.
- Age.

- Income.
- Racist, sexist or violent tendencies.
- Decision for the others to leave or stay.

Now the audience can see how they identify with this data based information. Further, they can also, see the many comparisons with contemporary politics. For example, the unpredictable, tumultuous and mendacious undertones hold much resonance when applied to real-world political analysis. Radosavljevic, who observed the piece on two occasions, splits the show up into three parts. It is in what she labels as the ‘third’ section that much of the emphasis for later analysis finds its base. In this third section, the candidates have been reduced to a smaller number who represent starkly different options for the outcome of the event. This section is less focussed on the personality of the candidate, instead, it is looking at the structures of the game at hand and what possible conclusion can be reached. Radosavljevic notes the important functioning of this section, areas in which I have chosen to anchor my analysis, she notes this part

gave us three options on a metapolitical level: the possibility of consensual absolutism, the possibility of resistance (or maybe even a

revolution), and the possibility of upholding the system of democratic pluralism and the advantages of dissensus itself.⁸

Before looking specifically at this important third section, I will firstly offer some broad comments on the piece. *Fight Night* is ostensibly a work of political theatre. In what precedes the only written text of *Fight Night* the company note how ‘we are confident that the show raises issues of politics and democracy in a broader sense than we imagined’.⁹ Personally, I was enticed by the use of spin, mendacity and persona within the characters. Throughout the performance, I maintained a distrust for every candidate, based on my own pessimistic personal beliefs that politicians have evidenced enough to me to warrant an almost blanket distrust. However, as someone who enjoys performance, and the performative, I was interested to see how the careful deployment of words and body language would cause me to select a candidate who I distrusted the least. I pondered, based on matching up with the candidates who assumed an ideological similarity to that of mine own, how much my distrust would succumb to advancing my own political agenda. For example, even if I did not trust the candidate, would I vote for them because they seemed to be the most socialist, more in tune with my personal ideology? Further, as I watched the so-called democratic system perform its functions, I

⁸ Radosavljevic, *The Machinery of Democracy*.

⁹ Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, p. 462.

began to question, as I do with the real-life democratic procedures in the UK, to what extent I am effecting any tangible degree of change. That the show provided opportunities for me to participate within the performance did not, as with politics, ensure that the performance was inherently democratic. Ultimately the people ruled, and not always fairly, within a prescribed system of control. In the conversations that followed with my peers, we noted how some of us wanted to seek out our own political agenda, whereas some played a tactical game, wanting to maintain their involvement with proceedings even if that meant abandoning their ideals. As my peers and I pondered these issues, we began to pose each other more probing questions. Would we create a coalition with a racist party if it meant getting a share of power? What lies would we be comfortable with telling to the nation? It was clear to me that the issues of politics and democracy had reached the 'broader sense' the company hoped for.

A further example of the political potential is provided through instances in which *Fight Night* references the meticulous spin-doctored personae of contemporary politicians. Official governmental documents have shown British politicians to spend staggering amounts on their curated persona and dialogue, something commented on in the press,¹⁰ strengthening *Fight Night*'s contemporary relevance, alongside its provocative subject and precise

¹⁰ Alison Little, 'The unelected 'Special Ones' advising Government ministers cost taxpayers £11 MILLION', *Express* (18 December 2015) <<http://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/627898/Government-minister-special-advisors-cost-taxpayer-millions-David-Cameron-George-Osborne>> [accessed 01 February 2017].

timing on a UK stage. Here Ontroerend Goed note how ‘We would let them vote for personalities, but carefully media-trained ones. We wanted to explore the importance of charm, appearance and persuasion, as opposed to the ideas a politician stands for’.¹¹ The importance of the curation of charm, appearance and persuasion for politicians is apparent by the numbers of staff needed alongside the recognition of their wages, some of which are higher than the salary of an acting member of parliament (MP), a point that has not escaped the British media in recent years.¹² In *Fight Night*, the performance’s host who is positioned as our truthful navigator through part of the piece, makes this spin aspect apparent to the audience. He divulges that ‘Whatever they’ve been saying here, they prepared their answers. For every sentence they spoke at least fifteen have been deleted’,¹³ expanding by saying ‘Every move they made has been rehearsed. Every pause – calculated’.¹⁴ This helps signify to an audience how the piece is designed to highlight the staged politics of our time, and cuts through the façade of the piece merely being a mode of aesthetic enjoyment.

Voting is always an important issue as the cornerstone of liberal democratic politics.¹⁵ Moreover, the piece consistently references ‘the system’, which could be taken as the system required for the mechanisms of the performance, and/or, more symbolically, the wide-reaching economic

¹¹ Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, p. 462.

¹² Little, ‘The unelected ‘Special Ones’’.

¹³ Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, p. 501.

¹⁴ Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, p. 502.

¹⁵ Zaroulia, and, Hager, eds., ‘Acts of Voting: A Lexicon’, n.p.

system of capitalism. At times, *Fight Night* attacks ‘the system’ it presents, allowing an almost anarchistic voice to suggest ‘the system’ is failing. One point in the text seems most illuminating when considering this symbolic political connotation,

That’s the problem. That’s the problem with the system. The only choices you have are the ones it gives to you.

The system doesn’t reflect what you believe in. It’s impossible to represent every one of you sitting here tonight. And the system has to stop pretending that it can.

No system should control you.

I don’t even want to change it. I just want to get rid of it. And get rid of the people that are stealing your votes, because none of us deserve your vote. Don’t even vote for me, don’t vote for anyone.

When they ask you to vote, show them that you don’t want to take part in it anymore. Press 9.¹⁶

Here we can see how *Fight Night* may have the political potential to reveal

¹⁶ Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, p. 508-509.

elements of domination from the democratic system at hand whilst generating a platform for belief in a credible alternative logic. This one quote, is the most telling textual evidence that *Fight Night* has the potential to achieve the aims I would argue are most important for political theatre (as outlined in the introduction), in trying to

build belief in alternative social logic, reveal an unseen aspect of capitalist power, or generate an absurd and awkward situation that momentarily breaches the seeming inevitability of capitalism and capitalist logic, allowing new thoughts and experiences to seep into the minds of audiences and participants.¹⁷

Through the mode of participation, knowledge on the audience is gathered by the company and shared back to its partaking spectators. This is achieved via the utilisation of data from sophisticated computer programming, able to analyse the votes submitted by an audience and feedback statistics to candidates, theatre-makers and audience when necessary. Not only does this help inform the company of the political demographic of the audience, but it also helps an audience understand what *their* decisions tells *them* about their potential stance on certain social issues. Ontroerend Goed note here that

¹⁷ Reynolds, *Moving Targets*, p. 16.

‘While the competition is going on, the system reveals more and more about the audience’s ideas and attitudes towards social issues’.¹⁸ This is done through numerous polls throughout the piece, ranging from choosing a most offensive word, qualities you consider when judging another person, and whether you would secretly admit yourself to be racist, sexist or violent. In a similar way to the way a general election evolves, citizens will learn more and more about their views towards a plethora of social issues as they wrestle to see which candidate or party reflect their views best.

What this particular case study typifies is an example of contemporary political theatre, however, this it is an example of such which demonstrates the tacit use of modes of experience harnessed by theatre makers for a seemingly market driven rather than politicised agenda, as outlined in the precursory chapters. As I will go on to examine, whilst this case study seemingly critiques capitalist logic, alongside a version of contemporary democracy within this structure, *Fight Night* becomes a curious oxymoron. The performance depends upon its participatory and experiential features, features that this study will attribute to an economisation of experience as a result of global capitalism and neoliberal values. Crucially in *Fight Night*, modes of stimulation and participation can be allied with market signifiers prevalent in post-modern capitalism. Cynically, it may appear that even theatre companies such as Ontroerend Goed, who could be seen to resemble that of the avant-garde, are

¹⁸ Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, p. 487.

at risk of becoming a product of a 'politics' they wish to critique, rendering them a blunt instrument in the emancipatory political interrogation of capitalism. Understanding experience is paramount for this investigation, and *Fight Night* exemplifies experiential characteristics, but simultaneously serves as a platform for political debate by reflecting voting systems and providing overriding questions on democracy.

The workings of this contemporary performance and its potential successes as a critique of capitalism prove a rich ground for investigation. *Ontroerend Goed* are constantly inviting its audiences to participate as well as observe, which is one way in which they may have 'aligned themselves with the corporate packaging of culture theorised as an "experience economy"'.¹⁹ With this in mind, I aim to highlight some uncovered nuanced features of this alignment not dissected in the work of Frieze, such as participation via non-participation.

The power of participation, pessimism and potential

Fight Night is a captivating piece of political theatre. The piece appears to be more in keeping with *Ontroerend Goed*'s aim of provoking its audience

¹⁹ Frieze, 'A Game of Two Halves', 322.

through engagement rather than ethical imposition. The way in which Ontroerend Goed engages its audience, is through the voting keypad. This acts as a physical platform for a quasi-direct democracy (in which people can directly vote on policy) that can, and indeed has resulted in further participatory acts in the performance. Audience members have been voted out of the auditorium, some have revolted and relinquished their opportunity to vote in favour of anarchism or apathy, amongst a whole host of other more individual responses. This is not purely down to the structural framework of the piece but also the spontaneous decisions made by audience members. More detail will be provided on these elements later in the chapter. What seems most significant, as one could expect from Ontroerend Goed's craft, is that the piece offers the choice of an abstention from voting. This is evident from the *Fight Night* text,

When they ask you to vote

don't press any button,

but hand in your device.

Make your protest visible.

Let's break the system.

Let's make their percentages meaningless²⁰

²⁰ Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, p. 513.

This inverted form of participation, taking part by not taking part, is just as important to the performance as those who vote in every round. Once more, this holds wider political implications as the decision *not* to vote was a contemporary debate in the UK at the time. To illustrate this point, I would consider the emergent popularity of Russell Brand as a political commentator, who advocated non-voting as a form of revolution. Brand was quoted speaking of electoral democracy in the UK that ‘it is a far more potent political act to completely renounce the current paradigm... than to participate in even the most trivial and tokenistic manner, by obediently X-ing a little box’.²¹ For democracy to sustain itself, it must attain an affective dimension, something that I see as actually causing an impact rather than a meaningless gesture. This idea is posed in theatre discourse, not voting may provide this affective dimension. For example,

Voting rarely makes the pulse race. It has – in many democracies – lost its urgency and its affect. Voting is a duty, or a protest; it takes a stand, or it stays loyal. And if we don’t vote? We perform that too. To not vote – through disgust, principle and even apathy – has a potential for more affective feedback than the vote itself.²²

²¹ Russell Brand, ‘Russell Brand on revolution: “We no longer have the luxury of tradition”’, *The New Statesman* (24 October 2013) <<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/10/russel-brand-on-revolution>> [accessed 12 December 2016].

²² Zaroulia, and, Hager, eds., ‘Acts of Voting: A Lexicon’, n.p.

One of the most amplified elements of participation is seen towards the latter end of *Fight Night*. This is when the audience has narrowed down their choices to a remaining three candidates. Practically, at this moment in the performance my interpretation (mirrored by Tomlin)²³ is that the audience is presented with three options:

1. Try to form a unanimous decision, a form of consensus politics
2. Continue to vote for the position you align yourself with most
3. Reject the system, relinquish the vote

All three of these options continue to permit a mode of participation, the performance's primary offer, due to the interaction afforded to the performance via the electronic keypad. However, the last option of rejecting the system prescribed to an audience may hold wider social and political sonority through inducing a further mode of participation. In this significant moment, audience members can, through a mode of inverted participation, reject this democratic system. This is participation via non-participation. Of course, the audience cannot reject the overriding system of the show which is

²³ Liz Tomlin, '“Constellations of singularities”: the rejection of representative democracy in Coney's *Early Days (of a better nation)*', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 36(1), (2016), 27-34, 30.

permitting this option, it is important to note that at this moment the two systems diverge. Returning for a moment to Breel's notions of agency provides further insight. It may appear like an instance of proactive agency, however, I would argue that this moment is reactive agency disguised as proactive agency as the audience responds to a specifically invitation within the affordances of the situation. This is crucial, as it again exemplifies the illusory forms of participatory theatre common in work of this tenure, forms which I believe do not further an emancipatory agenda of political theatre. This being said, the audience who relinquish their vote are aligning themselves with the views of 'No Vote', the anarchic voice who may be the most obvious vehicle for an emancipatory message with *Fight Night*. Those who decide not to vote, critiquing, if not attacking the system given to them, are asked to occupy the stage.

I would like to ask all of the people who gave up their device and the people who are still thinking about it to come to the front and sit down. I won't ask anything more. Just show your protest. Come to the front. And occupy the space.²⁴

²⁴ Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, p. 517.

Emancipating an audience via the experiential may be best illustrated in this moment, all done so without the presupposition that it *actually* does so and still within the fixed theatrical framework. This is achieved by allowing an audience an opportunity to signal their disdain for a failed system, escaping the conventions of the given democratic offer, which ultimately depends upon an audience's ongoing committal to the given participatory elements. Instead, a rejection of the experiential offering proffers emancipation, or at the very least a *sense* of it for its audience. Ontroerend Goed's Artistic Director has expressed his desire for an audience to reject the system, and comments that 'Real opposition would only happen if most people opted out'.²⁵ In only this small section of performance, the political potential is apparent, even if it afforded to them via a wider system of control. One succinct example is found via the use of the word 'occupy', which could be read as a direct reference to the topical political movement, theatrical in its own right. Perhaps this section echoes the movement itself; an oppositional force without any real leader, a staged occupation of shared space. Those who have handed over their right to vote, in a show of disapproval to the system or its candidates, leave their fate in the hands of the remaining audience members. Those who have continued to work with the system, are presented with an option 'So to all of the voters here tonight I propose a referendum. Tell them what we want them to do.'

²⁵ Jana Perkovic 'Ontroerend Goed's Fight Night: the audience gets its revenge?', *Guardian* (12 March 2014) <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/australia-culture-blog/2014/mar/12/ontroerend-goeds-fight-night-the-audience-gets-its-revenge>> [accessed 16 December 2015].

Should the non-voters here tonight leave or stay?'.²⁶ Audience members who have opted out of the system are pushed to a position where, should the remaining participating audience decide, their politics is no longer wanted or necessary for the mechanisms of the performance. This may be the most obvious political metaphor, of those who attack the system given to them, being literally voted out of proceedings and the auditorium via the majority rule, this tyranny of the majority holds wider indications to the pitfalls of contemporary democracy. Let us remember that both Hitler and Mussolini were legitimised via the workings of democratic elections. However, Ontroerend Goed create a scenario in which alternatively, even if the majority of people did not vote, the power would be with those who had. This is the playful way that the company show the consequences of rejecting the system. Potentially, those people who the company had led to thinking their revolt would empower them, would be betrayed by a number of ongoing participants who can still vote, and specifically vote to evict those who refuse to partake from future proceedings. Regardless of the result(s), Ontroerend Goed are imposing decisions upon its audience, via a pre-subscribed voting system.

If there is credence to the suggestion that political theatre has the potential to impress upon its audience a social or political consciousness, perhaps cultivating an anti-system mentality and then punishing it is an ingenious way of doing so. To elaborate, an audience member can be (not

²⁶ Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, p. 520.

physically) forced out a performance that they have paid for. There are plentiful political parallels to this system. The most basic example for a UK audience may be the way in which their vote is rendered somewhat obsolete should their political party fail to gain a majority in parliament. For *Fight Night*, the telling participatory feature could help reveal flaws in contemporary democracy, through an absurd situation. As the actor states at the moment of expulsion, ‘This is an *absurd* position to be in. It seems like you don’t have a choice anymore’ (my emphasis).²⁷ Whilst the experiential may be a marketable facet of political theatre its political permutations could nevertheless create a much more provoking insight.

However, ultimately, the system that dictates any potential outcomes remains most powerful. Ironically, perhaps, as suggested previously, even the most oppositional art risks co-optation by the capitalist system and can be sublimated into an aesthetic commodity. It seems that the use of participation in *Fight Night* flirts with such a message, but is restricted by an inhibiting system, a possible metaphor for any emancipatory art form operating within the structures of capitalism.

Importantly, the small keypad, an unobtrusive device by which the participatory experience is permitted, is the critical link by which an experiential analysis can be applied to *Fight Night*. Frieze notes how

²⁷ Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, p.517.

Fight Night manifests the company's continuing interest in testing the limits of participation conventionally afforded within theatrical and – by extension, but in contrasting ways – within social communities.²⁸

Here Frieze suggests that Ontroerend Goed are not merely using participatory elements as a marketable tact of its performances. Rather, the mode of participation could act as a tool to look further than how and what makes you vote, analysing participation in social communities. A look into some potential alternative approaches to *Fight Night* will help conclude this chapter.

The politics and economics of experience

Participation is the feature and premise of *Fight Night*. It is also the system by which the performance operates, what connects the decisions an audience member makes to the narrative of the plot. *Fight Night* is a participatory theatrical endeavour. This not only gives the audience the physical and tangible feeling of inclusion to the piece, but also offers a *sense* of ownership and control to a subverted protagonist, in the form of a decision-making

²⁸ Frieze, 'Beyond the Zero-Sum Game', p. 217.

audience. Frieze notes the importance of this mechanism when saying ‘Our votes are registered, and everything that happens is legible as a result of our choices’.²⁹ This is a choice made in order to stimulate and provoke an audience. Ontroerend Goed are renowned for producing such work, Hillaert notes that the company ‘introduce a variety of thrills from outside the theatre into an artistic frame. Whether it is porn, dark- rooms or frivolous parties, a theatre audience, it appears, should no longer be denied such kicks’.³⁰ Whilst these ‘kicks’ are presumably less ‘sexy’ than the offerings in its previous works, being involved in the mechanisms of the performance could create pleasure; ‘pleasure’, being a topical area of discourse for scholars dissecting work of this type³¹. It is my opinion that ‘pleasure’ is actively what a modern audience is seeking, ‘pleasure seekers’, even though they may be hesitant to admit so. Participation may be a pleasurable, unique experience, and for me, that is where the value ends, once the pleasure is received cognitively, the transaction has been completed. This pleasure is usually memorable as this is important for branding, it feeds into a modern narcissism of ‘me/I’ being directly involved in the performance, but it is largely devoid of lasting political value. The sense of control in choosing which performers stay or are expelled from the stage is an exciting prospect full of potential thrills for a theatre audience. This may perhaps draw upon reality TV and talent shows, a

²⁹ Frieze, ‘Beyond the Zero-Sum Game’, 220.

³⁰ Hillaert, ‘(Long) Live the Experience’, 433.

³¹ See: Alston, ‘Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value’

staple of neoliberal capitalism. As Alston argues, the pleasurable experiences to be gained by a performance such as *Fight Night* are not a 'fortunate by-product' of the theatrical event.³² Rather, the pleasure of participating in a process of eliminatory voting rounds is the very purpose and appeal of *Fight Night*, providing an experiential opportunity to its audience. Specifically, on Ontroerend Goed, Alston further notes a pre-requisite to its work 'through participatory actions, interactions and gestures' as being 'already inscribed as a fundamental part of experiencing this style of theatre'.³³

Frieze contends that the performance is not about one specific voting system or result. I would continue that the piece does not seem ostensibly idiosyncratic of the direct cultural influences Ontroerend Goed are inspired by or work within. Instead, the performance is 'about a perceived weakening of individual and communal ability to take action that might effect change within and to *any* system' (original emphasis).³⁴ Therefore, it is evident that from this perspective, *Fight Night*'s message bears the plausibility of inducing a critique of society. However, the visibility of such a critique is shrouded by the complexities of capitalist infrastructure, potentially limiting its effect. On this point, somewhat nuanced, is the fact that by participating in the voting methods prescribed by Ontroerend Goed, an audience may miss the paradoxical notion that they are indeed supporting the enforced systems of

³² Alston, 'Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value', 130.

³³ Alston, 'Reflections on Intimacy and Narcissism', 111.

³⁴ Frieze, 'Beyond the Zero-Sum Game', 217.

voting, a point that has wider implications for contemporary politics. On supporting the system, Frieze deduces that

the more votes we cast, the more those votes endorse the system of voting and prevent the system from being questioned. Our investment in the democratic process leads us to freely make choices that constrain us, and that uphold a system that fails to represent us.³⁵

Devriendt has admitted his longing for an audience to refute the theatrical structural obligations imposed on them, rejecting the ways in which to vote and creating their own democratic system. In interview, he states that ‘In *Fight Night* there is a moment where I hope they will, but I know they won’t. Real opposition would only happen if most people opted out’.³⁶

A structural element of importance present in *Fight Night* is the fact that often (but not always exclusively) interjections of participation are afforded to its audience as and when the performances pre-written structure permits. For example, ‘In the meantime we launched an opinion poll. It’s going on above their heads. Feel free to participate’.³⁷ By conforming to the

³⁵ Frieze, ‘Beyond the Zero-Sum Game’, 220.

³⁶ Perkovic, ‘Ontroerend Goed’s *Fight Night*: the audience gets its revenge?’.

³⁷ Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, p. 497.

voting methods an audience is prescribed with, the system's piecemeal participatory offer gains validity, which could be argued to reduce the potential for any further, more interrogative and potentially emancipatory forms of participation. Frieze notes this paradoxical problem, when asserting, as mentioned previously, 'The mechanisms that have allowed us to engage seem to have blocked any chance of changing the terms of engagement'.³⁸ This may be a blockade in the way of political agency, certainly the proactive and creative modes of agency Breel defines in her research. The production may not model an alternative social reality but simply reflect a current immersive one. Alongside this, there is one more important asset to the multi-layered entrenchment of such a performance within the systems of global capitalism and neoliberalism. Thinking of the theories of Jameson, harnessing qualities from the broadly commercial success of immersive theatre, the novel participatory and experiential elements in political theatre can be ascribed to the creation of an aesthetic that places the production of a commodified experience as its nucleus. Ontroerend Goed have, through *Fight Night*, created a marketable theatrical aesthetic. Of course, all theatre is marketable by its very nature. This exemplifies a shift from product to experience in global capitalism. The resulting aesthetic, one which forefronts the experiential, can be affiliated with Jameson's view on how global capitalism produces commodified aesthetics.

³⁸ Frieze, 'Beyond the Zero-Sum Game', 220 – 221.

Participatory experiences as evidenced (e.g. voting on a keypad) can be neatly packaged as a product that offer a frisson of excitement, a potential thrill, but proven marketability. Ontroerend Goed's closing comments on *Fight Night* appear quite presumptuous, they comment 'And the system? It has achieved its goal: creating a metaphor for the democratic machinations in the outside world, the audience is left with the question whether their vote really matters'.³⁹

To further investigate what has become an obvious metaphor, 'the system' being critiqued in *Fight Night* can be explicated to provoke a critique of capitalism. It would seem, on the one hand, that *Fight Night* may conclude a neutral commodity given its obvious incorporation into capitalism. *Fight Night* provides little if any option for an alternative political system, even though it pushes its audience to consider them whilst teasing them with provocations such as 'To think differently is beautiful'.⁴⁰ Instead, the only potential seed of change uses the inherited system and produces little in the sphere of fundamental change. Even the outwardly free choices belong to the power of the system. As Mark Robson surmises

The illusion of choice is offered as a substitute not only for conventional theatrical illusionism but also in place of any genuine

³⁹ Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, p. 525.

⁴⁰ Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, p. 519.

control. As in a market economy, free choice is always circumscribed, and frequently in ways that are designed to forestall political change⁴¹

Furthermore, *Fight Night* could be seen to *strengthen* the given system. By punishing those who opt out of the system it is ultimately supporting the system at hand. Whether liberating oneself or oppressing others, the system gains validity. Its critique, if any, operates within a pre-subscribed system, and its political references do little but support the status quo.

What seems most prescient is a potentially unassuming remark in *Fight Night* that ‘the system decides’, moreover, the notion that even with an audience led performance it is not the audience but indeed ‘The system that seems to have created its winner’.⁴² Whilst Ontroerend Goed issue these remarks to presumably refer to the theatrical mechanisms in the performance, its significance for a wider analysis is applicable. Ultimately, when assessing the inevitability of the capitalist system, that which contains and helps create such a work of art, alternative approaches (from outside and within) are required in order to critique capitalism.

Political theatre could use this change of approach in order to surmount a challenge to capitalism. Whilst creating work devoid of any influence from a

⁴¹ Mark Robson, ‘Performing Democracy’, *Anglia: Journal of English Philology*, 136(1) (2018) 163.

⁴² Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, p. 518.

potentially commodified theatre economy may seem an impossible task, perhaps the creation of micro-utopias and the careful use of experience in a previously unseen political project may serve as a response. Commodities could be subverted in order to further the agenda of political theatre.

The micro-utopian political project

Whilst for the most part it would appear that the commodification of experience within political theatre is a forgone conclusion, some alternatives are possible. In truth, an analysis of *Fight Night* illuminates a whole host of contradicting arguments concerning the particulars within this study, some of which will help enrich a more rounded understanding of the issues at hand. One good example is the notion of experience itself. As mentioned, experience is a popular area of investigation for scholarly discourse, be that in the field of theatre, art, economics, politics and business amongst other subjects. This results in a wealth of varying ideas and understanding on the issues raised within this given case study.

Bourriaud proposes that the ‘interactive’ and ‘user friendly’ features of contemporary art can provide ‘ways of living and models of action within

the existing real'.⁴³ However, if political theatre is in only one sense a mode of breaching capitalist logic via the creation of new experiences for its participants, then the implementation of participation in *Fight Night* could hold some modicum of political efficacy. Bourriaud talks specifically on the power of art that uses 'interactive, user friendly' factors, all of which feature in what he defines as 'relational concepts'. Thinking of works such as *Fight Night*, we can see how such a performance may feature within the artistic praxis that Bourriaud suggests appears these days to be a rich loam for social experiments.⁴⁴ This is due to the fact that the performance relies upon its interactive elements in order to produce a potential critique of social systems and behaviours, in a markedly different approach to his 'new ways of being', via the collection of data. For example, the opinion polls present in the performance. This study would not be the first to suggest Ontroerend Goed's work operates close to the boundaries of social experiments. Additionally, along with countless other contemporary examples, *Fight Night*'s use of participation affirms Bourriaud's suggestion that 'Spectator "participation"... has become a constant feature of artistic practice'.⁴⁵ As has been suggested previously, works such as *Fight Night* that market interactivity and participation, operate within fertile ground for the commercial aspects of contemporary theatre makers. Therefore, perhaps the only way to continue to

⁴³ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 13.

⁴⁴ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 9.

⁴⁵ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 25.

produce political theatre performances that evoke a sense, if not a physical action of critique, is for Ontroerend Goed to market themselves with the products of a proliferating experience economy. Absolute autonomy, it seems, may be an ideal out of the reach of contemporary art within the cogs of capitalism. Whilst Bourriaud is keen to note how a relational aesthetic may help promulgate change in society, he notes the problems art has had, and still is facing in this plight. He posits that ‘instead of culminating in hoped for emancipation’ we have seen ‘more and more sophisticated subjugation techniques’.⁴⁶ I would take this to mean the clever way capitalism can co-opt potentially emancipatory agendas in contemporary art, take for example the refusal to partake in proceedings in *Fight Night*, a point that ultimately shows the strength of the prescribed system at hand and of the commercialised experience at large.

Whilst this may be the case, the most essential notion is that political theatre can through the use of experience create a political project.

When Ontroerend Goed produce works such as *Fight Night*, they further the political project of political theatre. Operating within the relational realm, *Fight Night* can exploit the creation of sociability (creating a sphere of inter-human relations) by allowing citizens to play and decide on some of their own terms, drawing some of their own conclusions and carving parts of their own personal venture, albeit with a format that is somewhat limited.

⁴⁶ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 12.

One could propose that *Fight Night* may be an accurate example of a performance in which a ‘microutopia’ is created, as a singular act of resistance (granted, the fictional rejection of voting) situates itself within a performance built to model elements of contemporary society. Art that can manipulate participation in this way can be compared to Bourriaud’s own examples, a task undertaken by Bishop in her analysis. She poses that each of these examples was ‘accompanied by a rhetoric of democracy and emancipation that is very similar to Bourriaud’s defense of relational aesthetics’.⁴⁷ Bishop clarifies how relational art may be able to emit emancipatory effects, especially in a context away from a dated art history and set of values, applicable to Ontroerend Goed. Existing within capitalism, and borrowing from its commodified features, art that is adept in producing an interactivity in a ‘social form’ may be more than *just* a saturated commodity. In fact, they operate at a different level to mere optical contemplation, providing a cross physical/critical active and engaged angle for a spectator. Further, this interactivity may be politically efficacious, as it is not illusory but instead allowing for proactive and creative forms of agency, unanticipated, organic. *Fight Night*, a piece of political theatre that relies upon its interactivity and participation is at once ostensibly superior to those forms of art that Bishop argues leaves its audience disengaged. As Bishop notes, these are political in implication and emancipatory in effect. Ontroerend Goed may use a form that propagates the

⁴⁷ Claire Bishop, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, 61-62.

creation of social conscience, as it provokes an insight into democracy, not merely ‘dialogue’. It does this by allowing for forms of agency towards a more uninhibited audience. The intricacies of this democracy are played out by Bishop in her work, a process that has been and will continue to be mirrored in this thesis.

Whilst this is one way of viewing how art is able to create an interactivity, it is worth noting a more nuanced counter-argument in the form of ‘interpassivity’⁴⁸ a combination of two literal words, together with the state of ‘passivity’ alongside the potential for ‘interactivity’. This is a theory and neologism created by theorists Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek. Broadly, this logic argues that interactivity is a cultural imperative sold to citizens as enabling but is actually a form of slow violence that weakens our commitment to forming our own beliefs. Whilst there is the illusion of activity, the true position is passive.⁴⁹ With this logic in mind, whilst theatre makers neatly package an interactivity and participation in their work, this faux-interactivity possibly detracts from the critical potential of the work at hand. It could be argued that instead of creating social relations among people, *Fight Night* makes an interactivity with a ‘thing’, in a way similar to commodity-fetishism, symbolised by a voting keypad, signifying passivity.

⁴⁸ Robert Pfaller, *Interpassivity: The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

⁴⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Interpassive Subject* (Centre Georges Pompidou, Traverses: Paris, 1998).

Ontroerend Goed's *Fight Night* may be a way of emancipating its audience whilst avoiding the generalisation of didacticism of a performance with explicit political content, even though I believe the performance does exhibit such content. Therefore, the source of political power is via aesthetic experience rather than solely explicit political content. This strategy of political theatre utilises both its explicit political content and its experiential aesthetic in a previously unseen way in the genre of political theatre. The aforementioned modes of participation may help to reveal an unseen aspect of capitalist power or build belief in an alternative logic, increasing the possibility of radical change.

Although difficult to evidence, social change on a micro-political level via the creation of a sociable micro-utopia may be a useful agenda for companies such as Ontroerend Goed, even with its reliance on commodified modes of the experiential. Enabling a political consciousness is directly linked to the production of 'theatrical *actions* and *experiences*' (original emphasis),⁵⁰ evident in Ontroerend Goed's work. On this point Reynolds proposes that, 'it seems that theatrical *actions* and *experiences* may be one of the only ways to provoke a political consciousness' (original emphasis).⁵¹ Therefore, the work of Ontroerend Goed and similar performance models are of importance to the aims of the genre of political theatre.

⁵⁰ Reynolds, *Moving Targets*, p. 205.

⁵¹ Reynolds, *Moving Targets*, p. 209.

In closing, *Fight Night* could, in an alternative approach, become more than just a piece of political theatre, rather, a social and interactive microutopia. As Radosavljevic notes ‘on a certain microcosmic level, *Fight Night* gives us an opportunity to consider our options and test out potential outcomes of our actions in the run up to the general election we are facing in the UK’.⁵² *Fight Night* may present a slight improvement to the current political theatre dichotomy, and should therefore be credited for its nuanced accomplishments in the resistance against capitalism, rather than criticised within the grand and perhaps unobtainable ideals of emancipation. It could be determined that according to its nuanced endeavours it achieves more political agency than *Who Cares*, the piece does carry some political potential despite an obvious commodification. Ontroerend Goed are seeking its audience to question democracy, a recurring theme throughout this investigation. *Fight Night* may mirror the lack of agency citizens have in democracy, so could be used to political effect. Ontroerend Goed directly ask their audience ‘do you trust the majority of this audience?’.⁵³ Ironically, trusting a fellow audience member is placed above the trust of the theatre company, themselves a product of a commodity culture and player in the game and system of global capitalism. Perhaps questioning the motives of those who create and curate material for an audience’s consumption would empower the spectator in the plight towards an enlightened political consciousness and ultimate

⁵² Radosavljevic. *The Machinery of Democracy*.

⁵³ Ontroerend Goed, *All Work and No Plays*, p. 488.

emancipation. Certainly, the alternative approaches here show how using experience may further a political project, a theme that will be continued and developed in the next chapter.

EARLY DAYS (OF A BETTER NATION)

This case study, *Early Days (of a better nation)* by theatre company Coney, asks the question: how does one better a nation? Essentially, this is the overarching question (albeit a rather grandiose and problematic one) the electorate faces every time they meet a general election. Voting for a chosen constitutional and/or national representative may, seemingly, contribute to a bettering of the UK, via the commonly supposed progressive policies that candidates and/or political parties advocate during the election campaign. Of course, there are a multitude of reasons why people vote, or not, for political parties, candidates and issues, however, the important notion is that ultimately the UK electorate has an opportunity to potentially better their nation via proposed change proffered by competing political agendas. Their vote is an example of a micro-political decision with possible macro-political repercussions. In 2015, this opportunity was afforded to UK citizens once again, permitting the electorate the opportunity to designate a representative with whom they would entrust to make decisions on key issues such as

immigration, the NHS and the economy etc. The result is a contemporary example of representative democracy.

This chapter will look to assess a contemporary work of political theatre (*Early Days (of a better nation)*) that permits a particular mode of engagement for its audience. *Early Days* is an interactive and playful performance that asks its audience to rebuild a desecrated fictional land. Largely through the process of discussion and debate decisions are made that decide how to best use resources and reinstate a sense of democracy and nationhood amongst the separate regions for the sake of the state of Dacia. Analysis of this participatory performance will begin by looking at its relationship to an experience economy, specifically, in this case, via the provision of self-customisation and co-authorship. I will then suggest that *Early Days* presents a form of political theatre wherein experience is utilised as a platform to explore politics in a personal and unique format. I will argue that this given case study may produce an effective critique of global capitalism whilst being a product of it. Next, the chapter will move to focus on elements of the multi-layered systems at hand, further, the functioning of democracy within these systems. I will move to navigate the virtues of process over result and conclude by assessing whether this case study bears the political potential to emancipate an audience.

Importantly, there is no written text available for analysis, nor is there much academic analysis on the piece, therefore I will base my analysis of the *Early Days* performance on a combination of sources from audience members,

academics, critics and Coney creatives in an attempt to reflect the complexity and diversity of individual reactions. More importantly, the performance relies upon audience contribution and can therefore vary considerably from show to show. With this in mind, it seems wise to collect the thoughts from a number of witnesses to the performance to better understand its workings.

Whilst understanding the given political climate of a general election is imperative, further contextual significance is etched onto the front of the Scottish parliament (Pàrlamaid na h-Alba) as there exists a quote made famous by fiction writer Alasdair Gray, from a piece of Canadian poetry for use in his literary work, which reads ‘Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation’,¹ a quote with a fairly complex publication history,² now framed in the contemporary context of Scotland’s devolved power and renewed political agency. Scotland (along with Wales and Northern Ireland), courtesy of devolved bodies of government can, and have been, reframing their national identity in keeping with the wishes of the nation’s inhabitants, rather than being ostensibly subject to the wishes of a Westminster authority. They successfully have, and continue to reframe politics for the better of their national interests in the relative early days of such a devolution. Gray’s quote may be the nucleus from which theatre company Coney take the inspiration, if

¹ Dimitris Vardoulakis, *The Doppelgänger: Literature’s Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press), p. 293.

² Vardoulakis, *The Doppelgänger: Literature’s Philosophy*, p. 293–294.

not at least the title of one of their most recent performances: *Early Days (of a better nation)*, which will be the point of focus throughout the coming chapter.

Early Days is a performance produced by Coney, a UK based theatre company that began life in 2004, established the brand Coney formally in 2006 and have since consistently produced multifaceted work for a wide demographic of cultural consumers around the world. The company is predominantly comprised of a group of interactive theatre makers, but engage with stimuli from a variety of differing professions and genres in its work. Coney combine theatre with play, adventure, games, immersion and interactivity in a unique performance type and admit that ‘the work sort of sits between lots of different genres’.³ Annette Mees, *Early Days* director, posits that ‘We make sort of immersive theatre work in which the audience takes a leading role’.⁴ Whilst the work that Coney do is often diverse, audience participation is a recurring feature of its craft. Coney create performances for which an active audience are required, its aim being to look at questions it wants to explore *with* its audience.⁵ The audience becomes an integrated and important feature of the aesthetic/dramaturgy of the work.

Early Days (12-14th May 2015, Warwick Arts Centre) is an interactive piece of theatre, presented in a live-action, role-play style game true to its

³ Invisible Playground, *Coney – Early Days of a Better Nation* (online video recording), YouTube, 20 October 2012, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26vJIL5of00>> [accessed 21 March 2016].

⁴ Invisible Playground, YouTube.

⁵ Invisible Playground, YouTube.

playful conception and development by Coney and its contributors, including the Department of Political Economy at Kings College, London and academic staff at Warwick University. Audience members, now in the year 2034 are tasked with rebuilding the fictional central European post-revolutionary nation of Dacia, one left in ruin after the toppling of its fascist dictator (Victor Storm). This is achieved by the audience/citizens forming, or at least attempting to form, a model of government that can reshape a nation. Split into three fractious regions (the City, the Plains and the Islands), audience members must advance the show by voting, electing, debating (amongst many other functions) as they role play how best to re-build and avoid further crisis for their desecrated lands. The city has been largely decimated by the ongoing turmoil. The Plains is a rich agricultural hotbed that faces a refugee crisis. The Islands is a seemingly self-sufficient idealistic region spared from many of the immediate issues facing the other territories. The audience will have to decide, via the system they control, on how best to use their limited resources, resources that include money, medical supplies, security, power and food, in order to rebuild the political system. Of course, Coney as a proven theatrical provocateur are astute to create added tension by not affording its audience the full amount of resources needed for a total rebuild, a tool that acts as a platform for further, more considered deliberation. Further, the nation is beset with issues on nationalism, factionalism and borders that are at risk. As I will go on to elucidate, this bears an uncanny resemblance to the 2015 general election. The 2015 general election dealt with issues such as membership of

the EU, and what trade deals could better benefit the UK outside of the EU. Scottish Independence was another key issue, would Scottish citizens want to leave the United Kingdom and act as a separate nation? The rise of UKIP was prevalent in media coverage as they canvassed controversial marketing and rhetoric across the UK in order to gain political footing in the EU debate. Finally, immigration remained an important issue, border control was of course discussed as in every general election, but this topic was specifically heightened in 2015 due to turbulent times, war, and mass migration from countries belonging to the 'Middle-East'. Of course, many of these issues were not just consigned to the discourse surrounding the 2015 general election, they are often recurring debates and are still being discussed today, confirming its importance.

Upon arrival to the theatre space each audience member is allocated one of the three regions. Our given region is where we live. We are taken into separate rooms/spaces based upon the region we are now an inhabitant of. In these areas, a space comprised of chairs and a television screen, we are informed of the extent of the turmoil Dacia lies in. We are chosen as representatives for our given region, and ultimately our nation. A peacekeeping offer has been granted by the International Security Council (ISC) who are willing to submit troops to help the cause. We have no idea how this will affect important issues on sovereignty and independence for our nation. We discuss, at first in length, but are advised to remain cautious of time by an actor in the room, the implications this would have upon Dacia.

Debate ensues.

Next, the whole audience is invited to a national meeting in the main area, wherein we initially decide whether or not to accept the help offered from the ISC. Some regions favour this move; others are vehemently against it. The audience is still split into its three regions, but arranged neatly in a shared arena facing one another. What follows this is a lengthy process of suggestion and debate, often steered by elected group leaders. We are occasionally interrupted via a news style bulletin announcement, video statements or a mediation over the conversation by one of the actors. The news bulletins help to conclude what has been agreed, or largely disagreed, almost codifying the result of any audience decision. After voting on offered help from the ISC the debate focuses on two key issues 1) what political system to use 2) how best to distribute the inadequate resources. When creating this political system, audience members discuss potential options, is it going to use direct or representative democracy, should it install a new dictator, how does it combat idealism over pragmatism? Whilst there are more polemic opinions on national issues such as the ISC intervention as well as suggested forms of governance, the distribution of the resources seemed to allow for a much more nuanced and heated debate as citizens wrestled with the interests of their region and the nation as a whole in an altruistic vs. self-interest stand-off. Enacting the political system the audience has created, the future of Dacia is played out on a large map on the floor. There is a wealth of disagreement, I contend that this is intended by Coney. Importantly, this

whole process has a time limit, and the ticking clock contributes a polite reminder as well as added pressure to finding appropriate resolves to the carnage afoot.

What is most artistically interesting in *Early Days* is the commitment to let the audience decide much of their own fate, meaning that every performance is invariably different, dependant on the given audience they attract per showing. Regardless of the multitudinous audience led possibilities, *Early Days* does use a three act structure, helping to direct the course of events throughout the evening. Liz Tomlin comments on this structure when saying

each performance offered the same three act structure; the first act spent deciding whether or not to invite the International Security Council, the second act spent deciding how to decide, and the third act deciding where to allocate the insufficient national resources.⁶

This structure, alongside the occasional focussing of debate by actors (often for reasons of time) constitutes some of the minor in-performance mediation Coney hold over the piece. Again, this is intentional, in order to let the participating audience explore the workings of organising themselves and

⁶ Tomlin, 'Constellations of singularities', 30.

society, question democracy, nationhood, social systems and voter engagement, play politics, probe how to make decisions, develop institutions and question how they operate in practice, emulating the same questions citizens may ruminate upon pre-election. Coney themselves noted how ‘the show became part of the debate... in the run up to the general election’.⁷ The pertinent prescience of *Early Days* as a piece of political theatre is clear to see. Of course, its timing, similar to *Fight Night* and *Who Cares*, further quantifies its relevance. Not only is *Early Days* performed just before the 2015 general election, it’s presented around the time of the closely contested Scottish referendum, a question which interrogated Scotland’s independent status within the UK. This is not an example to be overlooked, the Scottish referendum showed political engagement on an unprecedented level, some constituencies recording 91% turnout. The theme of democracy for British people may be at its fever pitch. Furthermore, the UK’s position within and membership of the EU is/was a contributor to this theme. As a general election that offered vigorous debate on immigration, alongside the UK’s position within and relationship with the European Union, the interests of separate regions within the workings of a democracy holds particular sonority to the issues raised in the performance. To further this point, thinking of the divided and fragmented state the Brexit decision left the UK in provides parallels to the nation of Dacia. Whilst one considers how the topical and theoretically

⁷ Coney, ‘*Early Days (of a better nation)*’ (n.d.) <<http://coneyhq.org/2014/09/12/early-days-of-a-better-nation-2/>> [accessed 12 December 2015].

(un)democratic partly unelected European Commission is, especially pertinent for the UK's Brexit referendum, one can begin to draw parallels to an *Early Days* performance. Certainly, issues on national priorities such as immigrations caps, and regional inequalities such as a north/south divide seem to be mirrored in the performance. Simultaneously, Coney note some of the inspiration for the work, commenting on 'drawing inspiration from the 2011 England riots, Arab Spring, Iceland crowd-sourced constitution and the rise (and fall) of Occupy'.⁸ Thus, *Early Days* is a piece of work abundant in varied political context, subtext and inspiration. As Breel notes on the piece 'The political implications in *Early Days* are perhaps more visible than in most participatory performances'.⁹ What is perhaps most relevant to a UK audience who saw the piece in a period of time approaching the general election, is at such an important moment in time when politics seems to saturate the media agenda, having the chance to role-play a political representative, or nation, as *Early Days* permits, may make the performance more relevant, tangible and captivating for an audience. Its prescience is manifest in numerous ways, but physically playing at politics in the game offered by Coney at a time when 'real' politics is also being played out gives the performance much political potential. Breel notes that *Early Days* provides moments of 'creative agency', a new and insightful interjection to current discourse on agency related research and phraseology. Her paper on agentic behaviour poses 'a more

⁸ Coney, '*Early Days (of a better nation)*'.

⁹ Breel, 'Agentic Behaviour', p. 2.

nuanced, contextual approach to agency in participation, proposing *creative* agency as a particular form of agency (which affords participants the opportunity to contribute new content within the context of the performance)’ (original emphasis).¹⁰ Using Breel’s renewed understanding on agency it is possible to assess the aesthetic, ethical and political implications of participatory work such as *Early Days*. Specifically, this creative agency describes the contribution from participants, adding to the analysis some important terminology that may not have explicitly existed before.

At a first glance it would appear the piece exhibits the characteristics of a political theatre performance. *Early Days* carries the proponents of a piece one could attribute to political theatre, identifiable by its critical tone and topical political references. The performance permits its audience the opportunity to voice an opinion, even if that is not *their* opinion, whilst affording them an opportunity to be critical of the fictional system at hand, its institutions and workings, all done in the public format of a theatre. This mirrors the contemporary example of the Occupy movement noted by Coney as part of the inspiration for the performance, who demanded a voice in a public sphere throughout their ‘We are the 99%’ campaign.¹¹ However, this movement is not in relation to a fictional system, and not within a time-bound theatre framework, so somewhat distinct. The Occupy movement epitomises a

¹⁰ Breel, ‘Agentive Behaviour’, p. 1.

¹¹ Brian Stelter, ‘Camps Are Cleared, but 99% Still Occupies the Lexicon’, *The New York Times*, (30 November 2011) <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/01/us/we-are-the-99-percent-joins-the-cultural-and-political-lexicon.html?mcubz=>> [accessed 12 September 2017].

political epoch that Mees describes as ‘incredibly exciting to see. A lot of grass roots organising in politics, a lot of big revolutions, a lot of, fringe groups coming together and instigating big movements’.¹² The idea of small groups instigating change will be an idea explicated for the ultimate conclusion of this thesis.

Just a game?

With the audience at the helm of the action, role-playing and co-authoring the proceedings of the performance, Coney are allowing their audience to enjoy a political experience. Concurrent with the first two chapters, the offering of an experience is paramount to the performance framework. Coney construct an arena in which participatory politics and theatre marry to produce a layered experiential playground for their audience. As William Drew notes

What Coney is doing is bringing together the interactivity of an open-world videogame with a collective, political experience... It's

¹² Invisible Playground, YouTube.

interactive political theatre, which makes a lot of sense because politics is supposed to be interactive.¹³

Bowtell comments that they want their audience to understand how they ‘are co-authoring their experience with us’.¹⁴ This cross-pollinated political/participatory experience has led to audiences evicting actors, taking control of media, stealing resources, privatising land and institutions and instigating rebellions amongst various other responses¹⁵. David Hutchinson recalls aspects of this in his review for *The Stage*, commenting that ‘it is role play, debate and participation that are central... it is the audience that votes on where to take the narrative, the audience that offers the most interesting characters, and the audience that brings the conflict’.¹⁶ Whilst the audience seemingly controls their own theatrical experience, the provision of the overarching theatrical practicalities and framework are constructed by Coney. The theatre company have designed, produced and marketed (with notable success) a performance that offers its audience the chance to enjoy the experiential modes of participation, interaction, debate, game, role-play and

¹³ William Drew, *Early Days explores themes of politics and identity through theatre* (25 February 2013) <<http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2013-02/25/early-days-of-a-better-nation>> [accessed 28 February 2016].

¹⁴ Caro Moses, *Anette Mees and Tom Bowtell: Early Days (Of A Better Nation)* (17 April 2015) <<http://thisweeklondon.com/article/annette-mees-and-tom-bowtell-early-days-of-a-better-nation/>> [accessed 4 April 2016].

¹⁵ See: Tomlin, ‘Constellations of singularities’.

¹⁶ David Hutchinson, *Early Days (of a Better Nation)* (24 April 2015), <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2015/early-days-better-nation/>> [accessed 28 February 2016].

movement. Furthermore, facilitating an audience in driving the narrative, in an event designed to house such experiences may be a successful platform for an audience to discover other unintentional modes of experience without direct curation, specifically, as Tom Bowtell notes, creating ‘agency to build and test new political systems’.¹⁷ For example, Coney do not prescribe acts of rebellion such as a mass sit-in or walk-out, nor do they suggest the creation an internal coup or the banning of media, but, these are possible (and some of the actual) consequential effects of the performance type, all of which point towards a piece produced specifically for discovering modes of experience. It would appear that *Early Days* can be described as an experiential playground; which necessitates an examination of whether its political potential is compromised by its place relationship to the proliferating experience economy.

Here I am particularly interested in the co-authorship of personal experience that is central to *Early Days*. I am also interested in how this co-authorship blurs the boundaries between making and receiving within participatory performance, as I believe it proffers a host of ethical concerns, but for reasons of time, I will not expand on this notion within this thesis. What *Early Days* offers is the chance for audience members to engage with the performance by making their own decisions, which, can have a direct result on its proceedings. This is in stark contrast to procedure in *Who Cares*

¹⁷ Adam Alston, ‘Parallel interview with Jonathan Petherbridge from London Bubble and Tom Bowtell from Coney’, *Contemporary Theatre Review, Interventions*, 25(2) (2015).

where an audience can realistically only ever do as they are instructed. For example, an audience can choose to revolt and disrupt proceedings, they can offer themselves as political candidates for election, they can abstain from voting, they can choose to rebel from the system afforded to them. These few listed examples, along with an infinite number of other possibilities, characterise an audience's potential to co-author and personalise their experience. On this point, Alston notes that Pine and Gilmore 'identify how the establishment of a sense of authenticity in the experience economy is likely to involve an integration of the personal in the self-customization of goods in the experience economy'.¹⁸ This self-customisable experience is made authentic by the invitation to personalise elements of *Early Days* by making decisions and contributing to the advancements of the performance. There are various courses of action an audience member can take in order to fulfil this function, examples include: performing a role, 'standing up' for something, creating conflict or, perhaps, saving the nation. The experiential commodity of *Early Days* might be personalisable, as you can potentially shape it to your will. In juxtaposition, the collective nature of the piece presents some blocks to individual will as it does opportunities, not everyone can be afforded the opportunity to create their own role in the performance. Pine and Gilmore suggest on self-customisation that,

¹⁸ Alston, 'The Promise of Experience' (pre-publication).

the most direct way to help individuals fashion their own self-image: let people define and even create their own offerings. When consumers design their own footwear online at miadidas.com or NIKEiD.com, style their own clothes at landsend.com, configure their own car at mini.com or scion.com, express themselves at cafepress.com or zazzle.com, or craft their own music playlists for their iPods, the output automatically qualifies as authentic for the consumer.¹⁹

This seemingly authentic experience is made so via the offering of co-authorship. This permits the customer the opportunity to fashion self-image by a participatory and personal engagement with a product. However, this does create a paradoxical problematic, and should be looked at as one of the dubious pleasures of individualized consumerism that Kershaw recognises.²⁰ Pleasures are again a noted effect, a consistent undercurrent of such a performance type.

As illustrated in the previous chapter's analysis, the experience offered to a theatre audience is often created for a large number of cultural consumers, as was elucidated in the cases of *Who Cares* and *Fight Night*. Although seemingly personalised and individual, Coney are creating an experience for a

¹⁹ Joseph Pine, and, James Gilmore, *Authenticity, What Consumers Really Want*, (MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2007), p. 13.

²⁰ Kershaw, 'Discouraging Democracy', 282.

large cohort of cultural consumers. Located in Alston's case study research, but applicable to this example, Alston comments on the 'theatrical machine through which they [audience members] pass remains both stable and productive of comparable experiences for an indefinite number of cultural consumers'.²¹ *Early Days* as a theatrical machine grants its audience the opportunity to enjoy an ostensibly personal, co-authored experience, but, such an experience is produced for a number of participants by Coney, paralleling, on a *much* smaller scale the palpable mass production of a pair of Nike trainers or Apple iPod. This is experience economy at its most impressive, wherein a customer authenticates their experience via a personal engagement and customisation, failing to perceive its close proximity to mass production. Of course Coney are far away from a true sense of mass production, they are not the Lloyd-Webber or Punchdrunk of the theatre world, but they do operate in a similar way for a smaller audience. As Alston suggests

The fairly standard offering of an iPod, or a Mini – or a customizable computer game, or just about anything that can be both mass produced *and* customised, albeit with limitations – are granted a sense of authenticity through the perception of a tailored experience and a limited form of co-production.²²

²¹ Adam Alston, 'Reflections on Intimacy and Narcissism in Ontroerend Goed's Personal Trilogy', 113.

²² Alston, 'The Promise of Experience' (pre-publication).

Once again it is apparent that theatre does not operate in a space cut off from the reaches of neoliberalism. As was exemplified in the introductory section, theatre is a constitutive part of culture and is thereby unable to transcend the neoliberal, experience economy to which other domains are subject.

Ultimately, in the case of *Early Days*, the performance typifies a growing problem for genre of political theatre. The utilisation of experience can be attributed to the consumable, marketable and commodified remit of contemporary global capitalism. Moreover, the theatrical machine, which harnesses modes of participation, can manufacture a consumable product for an audience's enjoyment. The paradox apparent is allowing customers the chance to co-author a seemingly personal experience whilst simultaneously mass producing it for an abundance of cultural consumers.

Whilst it may be evident that *Early Days* is subject to the charges of commodification, this participatory performance may still bare some political potential as it gestures towards a notion of political efficacy, however difficult it is to quantify.

The system decides that you decide the system

An experiential playground. This has been the metaphor recycled recurrently throughout this analysis to describe the resulting effects of the products used by theatre companies such as Ontroerend Goed and Coney. Coney are a theatre company more, perhaps even *most* appropriately associated with the term, as they facilitate theatrical experiences exploring the boundaries and themes of games and playing respectively. The theatre company approach this with clarity when introducing their work, they admit that ‘We create games, adventures and play’,²³ all done in the vast ‘playground’ of interactive theatre. Coney’s interest in the workings of games contains a direct correlation with the workings of systems. Games, and certainly the games Coney create, use specifically designed systems. One only has to think of the systems used for videogames, board games and role playing games to understand that without some sort of structure the games would simply not work. Imagine the family arguments Monopoly would incite without an established rulebook and generally understood code of conduct. To further expose the marriage of games and systems, moreover, games *as* systems (a field extensively researched), Hannah Nicklin suggests that ‘games are systems – and because of that they’re very good at examining systems, how we are swept along with

²³ Coney, ‘About us’ (n.d.) <<http://coneyhq.org/2014/09/12/early-days-of-a-better-nation-2/>> [accessed 12 December 2015].

them, how they mould our actions'.²⁴ This provocation suggests a more nuanced understanding of 'system', which will be scrutinised on various levels throughout this section of analysis.

Firstly, *Early Days* is constructed by an initial system that controls the game/performance (what point is provisionally being discussed in which act (i.e. forming a democracy, choosing where to allocate resources), how much of each resource (tokens to spend on rebuilding Dacia) are being afforded to the audience, what are the suggested rules of the game?). Secondly, this initial system allows us to examine the subsequent system(s) of democracy (how is a direct or representational form of decision making influencing the creation of the new state?). Is everybody being heard in a direct democracy form of government? How accurately will views be represented in a representational form of democracy? The main difference between these two forms of democracy is that direct democracy permits citizens to have a direct input in the formulation of policy, whereas representational democracy forces citizens to elect a representative for their views. Finally, I can analyse, as has been consistent in all three chapters, the overarching societal system of control. This system of global capitalism may be seen to govern the workings of contemporary democracy, particularly in the case of the UK. As suggested previously, this is a micro-political performance, with marked macro-political

²⁴ Hannah Nicklin, 'Early Days of a Better Nation Scratch', *Hannah Nicklin: Theatre Maker, game designer, poet, producer, academic, etc.*
<<http://www.hannahnicklin.com/2012/05/early-days-of-a-better-nation-scratch/>> [accessed 28 February 2016].

connotations. In short, the micro-political systems of the show have macro-political implications, and can be analysed for their succinct references to the wider themes/systems of democracy and global capitalism. This can be understood in line with the aims of Coney and those with direct artistic input into *Early Days*. For instance, Annette Mees posits that ‘for me this kind of work is really good to look at social systems with’.²⁵ The game, the initial system of rebuilding the fictional world of Dacia, provides a platform from which wider societal systems can be investigated. As Mees further argues, ‘because games, interactivity, they are systems... so using those, those system like structures to look at the systems that we live within’.²⁶ *Early Days* as an experiential playground is a platform from which one can embark upon an investigation into systems. Furthermore, insight can be acquired that illuminates how these systems work, and how their references or semblances operate as systems also.

Via the prism of participatory voting, initially by choosing their version of democracy (any further participatory voting would be idiosyncratic to each performance), an *Early Days* audience is afforded an opportunity to examine democratic systems. Of course any given audience can decide what system they want to use, potentially creating their own version, or even refuting democracy should they wish. Tomlin notes in her personal recount of the performance that from the beginning the collective audience ‘now had to

²⁵ Invisible Playground, YouTube.

²⁶ Invisible Playground, YouTube.

decide how to decide'.²⁷ It is highly plausible that audiences would choose to opt for the established, recognisable forms of democracy in the rebuilding of their fictional homeland. To this extent forms of direct democracy (or pure democracy) and representative democracy (or psephocracy) are commonly accepted forms of western democracy, and as such were likely relied upon and applied in diverse ways in *Early Days* performances, certainly the case in the performance I saw. The chance of playing with direct democracy is possibly more unique to a UK audience, who may be more familiar with the representative system, only possibly participating in direct democracy in the form of a referendum. As Tomlin suggests this is

rare to experience in democracies and their institutional organisations... most often governed by political systems where individuals vote for representatives, who then populate institutional structures to vote – in principle at least – in accordance with the wishes of a majority of their electorate.²⁸

Importantly, democracy as a political issue is particularly apposite in contemporary debate, a notion that is factually inarguable but widely accepted

²⁷ Tomlin, 'Constellations of singularities', 28.

²⁸ Tomlin, 'Constellations of singularities', 29.

as true. Similar to the previously analysed term ‘political’, the term ‘democracy’ is one that can often be inexact, or as George Orwell,²⁹ and more recently Benjamin Isakhan notes, overloaded and difficult. Isakhan suggests ‘Defining democracy is a difficult and perhaps ultimately futile exercise...with many political scientists fumbling and debating over the precise wording of a definition’.³⁰ This seemingly difficult term is especially pertinent for political debate in the UK, even today, years after the performance. On this point, as the nation negotiates its position on the world stage given the recent Brexit decision, the theme of democracy presents itself as a subject to be reconsidered. Political commentator and journalist Peter Osborne comments in an interview with Owen Jones that ‘there’s a big struggle ahead to define how democracy works’.³¹ This notion is personified by the opportunity and potential struggles with working and playing at democracy in an *Early Days* performance, similar to the issues faced in Ancient Greece, how are all voices to be heard, can speaking over each other be avoided, will the tyranny of the majority reign supreme? Playing the system(s) of democracy and seeing their relative successes and failures is a desired intention of Coney’s craft. They want their audience to understand the pitfalls

²⁹ George Orwell, ‘Politics and the English Language’ in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell; Volume 4, 1945-50* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1978), p. 16.

³⁰ Benjamin Isakhan, *The Edinburgh Companion to the History of Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 4-5.

³¹ Owen Jones, ‘A soft apartheid towards Muslims is emerging in Britain’ *Owen Jones meets Peter Osborne* (online video recording), YouTube, 19 January 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXkKbFQRHcs>> [accessed 15 April 2016].

of working with contemporary forms of democracy via the rebuilding of the fictional world of Dacia. The performance may be working at its optimum when the resulting effects include an audience realising, as I did personally with my vote in the 2015 UK general election, that ultimately my vote may count for nothing, a point that probes the workings, or indeed failings, of a supposed democratic system. Additionally, Claire Bateman (known also under pseudonym of Minkette), a game designer and artistic contributor in the creation of *Early Days* notes how ‘We have our political systems which feel incredibly broken’.³² These broken systems, inclusive of the potentially broken system(s) of democracy are placed under scrutiny for an *Early Days* audience to explore for themselves. In addition, Kings College London, who contributed to the academically grounded development of the performance helped to give the performance a thorough base of political system and rhetoric, such as the continued practice and debate surrounding contemporary democracy. Importantly, a piece that presents the theme of democracy may be as prescient in the run up to a general election as, say, a piece about the NHS. It is important to note some of the issues surrounding Coney’s implementation of democratic topographies and debate in *Early Days*. For example, the European scepticism Osborne and Jones converse over in their YouTube discussion. This scepticism seems to have been heightened as the conventional left and right wing parties fight for a more central political position, perhaps

³² Invisible Playground, YouTube.

credited to the influence of an imposing neoliberal hegemony. Whilst *Early Days* does not explicitly examine left/right/central mind-sets, the decisions made by participants may align with these different viewpoints. For example, taking an anti-immigrant approach, or investing in the state and welfare might further an examination into such differing viewpoints.

For the most part, it would appear that the impending forces of a neoliberal hegemony present within the perimeters of global capitalism reigns supreme. However, whilst theatre may require a dependence upon the market, it *can* also act as a critical tool. *Early Days* exemplifies some of the struggles facing contemporary democracy, allowing an audience to discover such complications for themselves, all done so amidst a tense political climate using obvious political parallels. Kershaw's further comments would appear appropriate in this case when he posits that

theatre is an especially telling social practice, because as an institution it has to conform more or less to the disciplines of the market in order to survive, but as an arena for creative performance it always offers the potential for a radical critique of the social (and its economics) as a disciplinary apparatus. This tension provides another reason why

theatres are especially relevant to our understanding of struggles about the nature of democracy in any particular time and place.³³

Theatre as an institution has a resemblance to and long standing relationship with democracy. This can be noted in history, take for instance the role of ancient Greece, as the locus for democracy, philosophy and theatre of its time (for an in depth analysis on the role of theatre in a public sphere throughout history, specifically its links to politics and democracy, see footnote).³⁴ The term ‘Agonism’, the struggle of holding adverse opinions, has its etymological root in theatre: ‘Agon’ – contesting arguments in Greek tragedy (for exact definitions see footnote).³⁵ This relationship is clearly personified by *Early Days* as members of the audience gather together and share ideas in a public sphere, much like the early Athenian model of direct democracy. Reimagining this Athenian model may seem like a utopian ideal when applied to today’s society, but Coney are creating a performance type whereby a mass audience can voice varying opinions, regardless of their individual political persuasion, a notion intrinsic to the functioning of authentic democracy. The instrumentalism of authentic democracy is an important function of theatre, as McGrath comments

³³ Kershaw, ‘Discouraging Democracy’, p. 270.

³⁴ Christopher B. Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

³⁵ Anne Soukhanov, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd edition (Indonesia: Bukupedia, 2015), p.13.

One of the great services theatre can perform for the people of any country or region or town or village is to be the instrument of authentic democracy, or at the very least to push the community as near to authentic democracy as has yet been achieved³⁶

further postulating that

I would propose that theatre today would regain its role, dignity, and audience if it were to take as its project the responsible drive towards... “authentic” democracy.³⁷

This type of direct involvement, whether that be with democracy or performance respectively is rare to see in the UK. I would suggest that *Early Days* is an important example of political theatre operating within this framework, and an obvious example of theatre that can produce more than placebo form of political agency. Initially this works inside the theatre framework, but has agentive qualities that may continue after the performance

³⁶ John McGrath, *Theatre and Democracy*, ed. by Simon Trussler and Clive Barker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 133.

³⁷ McGrath, *Theatre and Democracy*, p. 139.

event, i.e. an experience that continues after the theatre event. Specifically, as Breel clarifies, a creative form of agency which becomes meaningful in terms of the performance and in the experience of the participant.³⁸ Breel distinguishes between agentive behaviour and the experience of agency in her work, suggesting that the first is the contribution to the creation of the work whilst the second is important for the participants' aesthetic experience.³⁹ I believe it is essential for emancipatory participatory political theatre to enable an audience to understand that their contribution can have a direct effect on the outcome of a performance, a tool that makes an experience that could contain repercussive agentive effects outside of the theatre framework.

Via the creation of *Early Days*, Coney have successfully produced a performance in which an audience can explore and enjoy a direct involvement in the realm of theatre and idea of democracy. This is moving away from the representational model of dramatic theatre most often experienced in the UK, and is instead generating constituent activity. Direct constituent activity is by no means a regular occurrence, for the most part both theatre and politics rely on representation by the few of the many, on this point Jonothan Neelands evaluates that 'In so-called Western democracies the few represent the many in the dominant theatre tradition, which makes the mass of the audience into

³⁸ Breel, 'Agentive Behaviour', p. 5.

³⁹ Breel, 'Agentive Behaviour', p. 4.

passive non-actors and the few on the stage to act on our behalf and in our place'.⁴⁰

The participatory experience in the performance is helping an audience question the workings of theatre and politics via the prism of authentic democracy. For me, having the chance to see the reasons for my vote counting for nothing proffered a deeper understanding as to real world politics. In truth, *Early Days* is a good example of the experiential wake-up call Aston considered in her work, a performance suited to Aston's powerful rhetoric. Aston conceptualises a 'process of reasoning toward an arousal of critical senses or sensibilities – or effecting a visceral, experiential wake-up call designed to bring us to our political senses'.⁴¹ Ironically enough Aston's words locate themselves within the representational model of Caryl Churchill's work that I would argue is unfit to act as political critique through its representational form. This is because a theatre audience has seen for centuries representational theatre that I believe has done little in the way of emancipating an audience and surmounting a challenge to dominant ideology. Instead, participatory theatre which does not necessarily depend upon representation (but does often use it) holds the potential to create social relationships among people rather than commodified objects. For me, as is now clear, true participatory theatre is having the ability, in any respect, to co-

⁴⁰ Jonothan Neelands, 'Acting together: ensemble as a democratic process in art and life', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 14(2) (2009) 173-189, 186.

⁴¹ Aston, 'But Not That: Caryl Churchill's Political Shape Shifting at the Turn of the Millennium', 158.

author an experience away from what is necessarily prescribed. This could be choosing which way to turn, what to vote for, whether to run for office or not. These instances may be instigated via a representational form, but are active moments of interactivity and participation.

Returning to Aston for a moment, I would explicate her logic and contend that the experiential wake-up call could be suited to this participatory work present within this case study. Furthermore, exposing the flaws of democracy and other political issues in this unique way could exemplify a moment in the theatrical repertoire which expose and mount a minor challenge to capitalism, reveals previously unseen capitalist logic and allows new thoughts to resonate within the minds of its audiences.⁴² However, before being able to fully attribute *Early Days* with these potentially emancipatory features, I must consider, as done so in previous chapters, the use of spin and mediation. Investigating this will assess whether *Early Days* operates as a piece of theatre able to circumvent its overtly commodified and curated performance framework whilst being able to proffer the genuine prospect of social change.

⁴² Reynolds, *Moving Targets*, p. 16.

Spinning social change

Fight Night is a performance honest enough to concede its use of spin. Its narrator, and the performance's trusted guide admitted that the fictional political personae had been privy to manipulation, suggesting that the seemingly honest characters on stage were the subject of mediation, speaking words specifically scripted to garner a given response.⁴³ This of course emulates contemporary politicians, granted not the confession, who often depend upon a similar use of spin and manipulation over material. Further, *Who Cares* demonstrated a piece of verbatim theatre that used only the words spoken by those connected to the NHS. However, Wynne has a commercial responsibility to create a saleable and ultimately profitable performance. The verbatim practitioner is comparable to the government spin-doctor, able to manipulate the levels of truthfulness available to an audience and sat firmly at the apex of control, a position shrouded in ethical concerns. The performance does not align with an emancipatory agenda of political theatre, Lyn Gardner confirmed the wariness of pieces such as *Who Cares* as a critical piece of work when noting that 'perhaps a play at the Royal Court, however angry and urgent and edgy, is unlikely to bring about social change'.⁴⁴ Whilst the notion

⁴³ Ontroerend Goed, *All work and No Plays*, p. 501.

⁴⁴ Lyn Gardner, 'Staging a revolution: can theatre be an affective form of activism?', *Guardian* (23 March 2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2016/mar/23/theatre-effective-protest-activism-change-debate>> [accessed 8 August 2016].

of curated and mediated material may be unmistakable in the first two case studies, *Early Days* is a performance that *could* be viewed differently. *Early Days* enjoys a framework intentionally loose in structure, in order to allow proceedings and even possible models of authentic democracy to take place. As mentioned previously, the instances of performance structure include use of the three act structure, the constructed steering of key debates and decisions within given time frames, the advancements propagated by the Coney cast and media bullet-ins, and a ticking clock. In this respect, it is plain to see that Coney's use of spin or mediation over the performance proceedings is minimal, especially when compared to the wholly or largely scripted examples seen in the two previous case studies. As a performance that could provoke an infinite amount of responses dependent on what audience members it attracted each night of its various runs, *Early Days* is allowing its audience to predominantly self-govern its proceedings and conclusions, indeed, its very political effects via the experiential vehicle of participation. Coney are facilitating an experience wherein the political effects are not prescribed or governed, likewise minimally manipulated or curated, but instead determined by the will of their audience. As Tomlin notes the performance was 'not designed by the artists to achieve any particular political effect in conclusion, but were entirely down to the audience on the night'.⁴⁵ This epitomises the imperative link between theatre and democracy, moreover direct, participatory

⁴⁵ Tomlin, 'Constellations of singularities', 30.

and authentic forms of democracy that proffer genuine agency and activity for citizens in a non-representational mode. Crucially, when considering society, democracy depends upon a citizen's role in self-determination. Noam Chomsky posits that,

A society is democratic to the extent that its citizens play a meaningful role... if their thought is controlled, or their options are narrowly restricted, then evidently they are not playing a meaningful role: only the controllers, and those they serve, are doing so. The rest is a sham, formal motions without meanings.⁴⁶

The performance structure in *Early Days* does not explicitly prescribe agency, impose a moral code or insinuate a particular political critique. Rather, through the production of the experiential and its layered political connotations, *Early Days* creates a platform for an audience to discover their own sources and understanding of critique, potentially leading to the hoped for emancipation political theatre strives for. The piece does however provide a platform for countless modes of agency at various junctures throughout the work. Importantly, the consequences of the uninvited eruptions of agentive

⁴⁶ Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy* (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 6.

behaviour present within *Early Days* performances are ostensibly devoid of political calculation or direction. To further explain this notion, if Coney are not directly or unambiguously cultivating an attack on global capitalism, any prospective critique of the system is a result of allowing citizens to discover, through their own invention, how *their* devised performance and subsequent parallels inform *their* understanding. This marries with what Reynolds remarks when suggesting that ‘theatrical *actions* and *experiences* may be one of the only ways to provoke a political consciousness’ (original emphasis),⁴⁷ however, this is hinged upon an audience having the opportunity to co-ordinate their own experience whilst being able to question the wider implications of their political agency. In *Early Days* debate could become raucous, anarchic or even perfunctory within the proposed time limit of the performance. Unanticipated moments can also arise, moments such as the pilfering of tokens, the privatisation of institutions and the undermining/ignoring of democratically created systems (See Tomlin ‘*Constellations of Singularities*’ and Radosavljevic ‘*The Machinery of Democracy*’). Breel notes how in one performance ‘a small group of participants evicted Dom the media representative from the room and tried to take over the broadcast platform’.⁴⁸ This is a clear illustration of the effects of nominal artistic mediation. However, this succinct occurrence in one performance demonstrates further significant political colours as it could well

⁴⁷ Reynolds, *Moving Targets*, p. 194.

⁴⁸ Breel, ‘Agentive Behaviour’, p. 1.

epitomise a warranted distrust of real political and societal institutions and rhetoric, as well as display a widespread suspicion of the contemporary media industry also, just one of many potential interpretations of the performance audience members could have garnered. McGrath evidences a basis for this cynicism when noting that

If we pause to consider the sources of most of our population's information today – The Sun and the rest of the Murdoch and its rival press, television news, the fruits of the Government's spin doctor's labours, and the advertising industry - we can have little doubt that the foundations of information upon which today's consumers/voters take action are definitely shallow.⁴⁹

These shallow sources of information are not conducive for the plight of clear decision making and ultimate emancipation. Instead, when thinking of an art form with political potential, theatre should be aware that in order 'to make reasonable decisions, every citizen needs one thing: accurate, unbiased, and full information. Without it, their decisions are based on lies, misunderstanding, propaganda, and prejudice, so are worthless'.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ McGrath, *Theatre and Democracy*, p. 135.

⁵⁰ McGrath, *Theatre and Democracy*, p. 133.

Importantly, we cannot say that an *Early Days* audience received this, in fact, much information was seemingly left out in order to allow more freedom to create dialogue. Alongside the provision of accurate, unbiased and full information, an audience may require an individual and non-determined experience in order to seek out a truly emancipatory outcome. This being said, just like the political spin doctor who maintains a position of mastery that can influence others, theatre makers only seek to affect an audience via the manipulation of an experience. Here we can see an ethical dilemma. Such manipulation, even if its intentions remain scrupulous, causes one to question how genuine the participation, experience and created agency actually are. By merely framing the performance Coney situate the experience ‘within the systems and power structures of that particular context’.⁵¹ Personally, I want to commit to the logic that the performance creates moments of genuine participatory agency and critique, however, after returning to the fact that Coney create the perimeters for which this can be achieved, my optimism is somewhat clouded. Additionally, I am aware of the inequality between artist and audience, who are largely subject to invitations to participate via Coney’s structured incitements. Having said that, I would argue *Early Days* provides a stark contrast to other pieces within this spectrum of work. *Early Days* offers the most minimal forms of curation and manipulation, permitting its audience the opportunity to self-discover notions of democracy. *Early Days* is not a

⁵¹ Breel, ‘Agentive Behaviour’, p. 2.

piece wherein a given political outcome is the ultimate reward for its creators, instead, the real position of mastery could and should remain with the audience members, a group of citizens who simultaneously resemble and critique contemporary democracy. The resulting effects of *Early Days* are not prescribed by an inhibiting system or under the absolute control of an artistic director, but are based on the individual constituents of its given audience alongside the infinite undetermined responses an audience driven narrative may create. Bowtell demonstrates this when describing the objectives of *Early Days* in interview, he states that

we use fictional worlds to make changes in the real one. ‘Early Days’ doesn’t have a political agenda, there is no right answer to the show, and there is no party political viewpoint we want our audience to adopt. Instead, the change we want to make is more personal.⁵²

This marries with the theories of Rancière. Rancière was against the position of mastery that some political theatre used in order to attain a political outcome.⁵³ Rather, and specifically for this case study it would be more applicable to find a

⁵² Moses, *Anette Mees and Tom Bowtell: Early Days (Of A Better Nation)*.

⁵³ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 11.

political potential that relies not on collective predetermined response to artistic intention, but on individual and undetermined responses to aesthetic stimuli... particularly influential within much of the re-thinking of the political that had occurred in theatre and performance studies over the last decade.⁵⁴

Instead of conforming to the roles and framework offered by the artist, an audience can re-write the co-ordinates of their experience.⁵⁵ Co-authoring a performance may at the very least allow the participant to, using language borrowed from Frieze, 'imagine re-designing the world beyond the particular performance context'.⁵⁶ This may be a subversion of capitalism, using seemingly commodified participation as a tool for the empowerment for an audience. The commodity can be transformed into a tool for emancipation. This transformation is one that sees a change in both theatrical and societal systems and structures via the revolutionary use of experience. This may not incite the perhaps quixotic idea of a mass revolution, but instead is more in keeping with Rancière's theories of individual political potential, one that

⁵⁴ Tomlin, 'Constellations of Singularities', 30.

⁵⁵ Tomlin, 'Constellations of Singularities', 30.

⁵⁶ Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, p.27.

comes with individual interpretation and co-authoring of meaning. These points of resistance, moments of emancipation, examples of critique, wake-up-calls, all strive towards the same goal; that being the subversion or disruption of global capitalism and the provocation of social change.

Rancière suggests that ‘Theatre is the place where an action is taken to its conclusion by bodies in motion in front of living bodies that are to mobilized’ suggesting that this could be achieved via ‘a theatre without spectators, where those in attendance learn from, as opposed to being seduced, by images: where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs’.⁵⁷ This resonates with *Early Days* as a performance, one that strives for an active audience of participants. ‘Active’ in this sense is the audience’s ability to co-create, moreover, their capacity to make their own interpretations of the information/roles they are given. Furthermore, Coney seem not to be the ‘ignorant schoolmaster’ but seek to play the role of the educator who ‘does not teach his pupils *his* knowledge, but orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified’.⁵⁸ *Early Days* does not just ask its audience to create a version of democracy, it asks them to test it, see its successes and failures unfold during the course of the evening, and contemplate these findings in a wider sphere beyond the confines of a performance.

⁵⁷ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 11.

Rather than exploiting participation solely for the commercial needs of theatre, it would appear that *Early Days* explores the bodily engagement of its active participants in order to induce a political consciousness. Much like the theatre of Brecht, audience members are encouraged to view political issues (i.e. democracy) in a different way, in an attempt to allow them to understand how to bring about some form of social change. However, Brecht's theatre is arguably representational, and whilst evidencing similarities in content, is a very different model of working. When thinking about Brecht's teachings, Freshwater suggests that 'Sometimes it can seem as though Brecht's ideal – a critical, intellectually engaged, and questioning audience – is a long way from realisation'⁵⁹. However, *Early Days* is one case study that may seek to challenge Freshwater's scepticism, as a piece of work that does aspire to Brecht's ideal. In truth, *Early Days* demonstrates theatre's potential

to be educative and empowering, to enable critical and ethical engagement, to awaken a sense of social responsibility, or to raise an audience's sense of its own political agency... to move beyond castigating audiences for their passivity towards enabling their active participation in performance.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, p. 49.

⁶⁰ Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, p. 55.

Early Days uses participation to illuminate, in an individualised and unanticipated way, moments of critique. Certainly, this aligns with Dolan's hopes for a political theatre that acts as a 'space for dissent and debate, disagreement and critical refinement, a forum through which to think about values and in which to install new visions of self, community and nation'.⁶¹ Contrary to the sceptical outlook on contemporary political theatre as nothing but a champion of commerce, *Early Days* is an, albeit rare, instance of a model of theatrical performance able to shape ideas, specifically on democracy. This case study is more applicable to the theatre and performance Reinelt describes when discussing

Theatre and performance, seen as an institution whose chief function is the production of the social imaginary, can play a potentially vital role in shaping social change. In a time when much theatre practice, especially in commercial and regional venues, seems anemic or irrelevant to public life, the affirmation of this constitutive function of theatre is essential. It means that we will have to reconceive of our theatres as a place of democratic struggle where antagonisms are aired

⁶¹ Jill Dolan, 'Rehearsing Democracy: Advocacy, Public Intellectuals, and Civic Engagement in Theatre and Performance Studies', *Theatre Topics*, 11(1) (2001), 1-17, 5.

and considered, and where the voluntary citizenry the audience, deliberates on matter of state in an aesthetic mode.⁶²

It is key to note that this is not a results-based performance. Coney want their audience to enjoy a personal and unanticipated experiential venture into a fictional world fraught with issues and struggles facing contemporary politics. This venture, and this process may be more important than the resulting effects.

Process > Result

The production and utilisation of experience, in line with the proliferation of the experience economy has proven a widely marketable and profitable venture for the theatre industry, take the work of Punchdrunk and Shunt as palpable examples. One cannot underestimate the reliance that theatre companies have upon the market, often a commercial non-negotiable in order to survive. However, there are stark differences between industry and art when

⁶² Janelle Reinelt, 'Notes for a Radical Democratic Theater: Productive Crises and the Challenge of Indeterminacy' *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theatre*, ed. by Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer (MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. 289.

thinking of process and result. Neelands elucidates this notion in his work.⁶³

Neelands first notes the thoughts of theatre director Lev Dodin who states ‘if we compare industry and art: in industry the value is in the result; you produce a thing and they pay you for what you have produced; in art the value is not in the result but rather in the process’.⁶⁴ *Early Days* illuminates this comparison, as the result of the performance is perhaps less important than the value found in the process. Speaking of process in this way, I want to make clear that the ‘process’ in this case is the ‘show’, the product that customers pay for, as opposed to the process of rehearsal or ensemble training. This is often the distinction used when discussing process and product, and largely applicable to the work of Neelands. However, I believe it can be used to discuss the process and product of the show itself. Some of the many critics who saw *Early Days* touched upon this idea. For example, Nicklin suggests about the performance that ‘maybe it needs to let us repeat the same mistakes, maybe it needs to be a space to fail, so that we go away and think ‘must try harder’’.⁶⁵

Thus, the process of creating and working through forms of voting or democracy is more important than seeing the fictional Dacia rebuilt to its optimum utopian model. Indeed, the struggle of working through such a performance, seeing your vote amount to nothing, your tokens stolen, a dictator privatise something you wanted nationalising, these all stress the

⁶³ Neelands, ‘Acting together’, 181.

⁶⁴ Neelands, ‘Acting together’, 181.

⁶⁵ Nicklin, ‘Early Days of a Better Nation Scratch’.

importance of process. Ultimately, what happens to Dacia is unimportant, but the process of getting ‘there’ along with its many trials and tribulations is key for any lasting effects. As James Tully posits it is the process of political struggle itself rather than the outcomes that have the potential to develop a second-order identity as an active and civically engaged citizen,⁶⁶ *Early Days* certainly allows for, if not intentionally creates a space in which political struggle is apparent, thereby creating actively engaged citizens within the fictional environment. Indeed, I could explicate the importance of process onto a much wider scale, analysing with some success the significance of political struggle in instances around the world. In these cases, the process and given struggles carry heightened implications. As Homi K Bhabha notes, ‘the process of active, civic engagement in the belief that the world is changeable was the lasting legacy of the struggle not its immediate outcome’.⁶⁷ This is particularly pertinent for a political performance that aims to provoke social change for its active participants via the experience of an often tumultuous struggle at playing with politics. Perhaps the micro-political *does* have potential macro-political agency. Tomlin gestures towards this in her interviews with the Coney creative team who admit that the ‘principle aims of the project was “to get people together to talk about big ideas”’; and that a “successful” show... was not about how far they get, but the quality of the

⁶⁶ James Tully, ‘Struggles over Recognition and Distribution Constellations’, *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, 7(4) (2000), 469-482.

⁶⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, 1994. *The location of culture*, London: Routledge, p. 27-28.

debate within the process'.⁶⁸ The processes of decision making and democracy, their struggles, shortcomings, debates and wider implications are important for an audience. To reiterate this point, 'many participants had indeed valued this opportunity to take part in political debate, and some had expressed their intention to continue doing so in the future'.⁶⁹ This may be the ultimate achievement for a work of political theatre in a society saturated by global capitalism. Enabling debate and its continued or lasting effects in a non-didactic and unanticipated format is a credible way of creating active citizens who hold the prospect of contributing to social change, in whatever varying or lesser form that may take. A constellation of these efficacious singularities may provide a long overdue sense of optimism to those who believe political theatre can cause social change in contemporary society. Those optimists may take refuge in the fact that the process of emancipation is visible in examples such as *Early Days*.

Early Days of a better theatre

Early Days may be the anti-thesis to the cynicism of commodity saturated theatrical culture present within global capitalism. Not only is the piece

⁶⁸ Tomlin, 'Constellations of Singularities', 28.

⁶⁹ Tomlin, 'Constellations of Singularities', 28.

overtly prescient by its topicality alone, but, its contextual significance makes it an indispensable exemplar of political theatre with outright political potential. The piece is adroit enough to resemble the fun role-play adventure or even a video game like escapade, a clever tact for attracting cultural consumers. Further, games could present a form in which to achieve genuine change, as Jane McGonigal describes ‘the power of games to reinvent everything from government, health care, and education to traditional media, marketing and entrepreneurship – even world peace’.⁷⁰ McGonigal suggests that game designers can help create immersive and engaging practice for society at large, gaming for her can act as a platform for change. If we think of games as systems, then *Early Days* plays a strong hand against the seeming impenetrability of global capitalism. As McGrath states when synthesising the work of Castoriadis, ‘theatrical questioning does not halt before any postulate presented as ultimate and unchallengeable’,⁷¹ *Early Days* crystallises this kind of theatrical questioning. Participation used correctly can emancipate an audience, as Freshwater suggests, participation is ‘a potent method of empowerment’.⁷² However, she is also wise to note that ‘participation does not necessarily amount to empowerment’,⁷³ as is evident in examples such as *Who Cares*. Whilst creating an active and engaged audience in this unique self-directed way may act as a powerful mode of critique, it can as easily be co-

⁷⁰ Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change The World* (New York: Penguin, 2011), p. 8.

⁷¹ McGrath, *Theatre and Democracy*, p. 137.

⁷² Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, p. 56.

⁷³ Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, p. 62.

opted and seized upon by the power of global capitalism. I look to Facebook as an example of this, a personal, self-curated, social network that seemingly exhibits individual freedom, however, it is very much at the heart of a neoliberal economy, and comes with a strict framework and order. In the simplest of analogies, it would appear that less manipulation and curation equates to more freedom and empowerment in which to self-discover emancipation. This is especially applicable to performances such as *Early Days* which I have argued carries much macro-political significance. The belief in theatre as a mechanism in the struggle against capitalism remains apparent, if not reimagined and reinvigorated by performances such as *Early Days*. Freshwater muses upon a 'bygone age when theatre was a venue for genuine public debate and dialogue where audiences could express themselves without inhibition and effect social change'.⁷⁴ *Early Days* is a striking model of such theatre, not consigned to a bygone age but very much a part of contemporary culture, using experience as the link between audience participation and political empowerment. As Alston notes *Early Days* goes some way to 'encourage participants – to reflect on their own political values and where these fit, or fail to fit, within a real or imagined system'.⁷⁵

In closing, as the political landscape changes in unprecedented and unexpected ways, the role of a theatre that specifically uses this model may

⁷⁴ Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, p. 26.

⁷⁵ Alston, 'Parallel Interview with Jonathan Petherbridge from London Bubble and Tom Bowtell from Coney', n.p.

have to renegotiate its position in society. As Gardner comments ‘The idea of artists driving change is a powerful one, and has particular appeal during a time when the right is on the rise, both at home and across Europe. The act of gathering people together is potent, potentially even dangerous’.⁷⁶ I would contend that the democratic act gathering people together is essential, but their affordances and ability to self-author their political agency indispensable. The performative system must not constrain but engender social change. I would take Occupy as the somewhat performative but expressly political example to induce optimism for the effects of such a process. The post Brexit turmoil permits me to wonder whether, in the early days of a more tumultuous nation, a potent, dangerous theatre can have much more of an important role to play than ever before.

⁷⁶ Gardner, ‘Staging a revolution: can theatre be an affective form of activism?’.

CONCLUSION

My findings have explored a range of responses to the questions on what participatory political theatre can achieve when tied into a potentially toxic relationship with the experience economy and global capitalism. Given the attraction of participatory practice and the utilisation of experience in contemporary society/political economy, as well as in theatre and performance, its relevance in current academic discourse is of overt significance. From a holistic look across all three case studies it is visible how works of theatre thematically anchored around the 2015 UK general election instigate an investigation into how, and with what effects, political theatre can gesture towards social change. Further, as the embers of strategies present within the avant-garde heritage perhaps rekindle in examples like *Early Days*, terminology such as critique, liberation, efficacy, resistance, empowerment, subversion and emancipation can once again resume their significance in contemporary theatrical discourse. For this reason, I believe my case studies prove a timely interjection into such conversations. This thesis questions some of the prerequisites often mounted as fact, including the death of the avant-garde (and its relevance in contemporary discourse), the impenetrability of

capitalism, and the reimagining of participatory political theatre as purposeful rather than infertile and perfunctory.

The chosen case studies intentionally fluctuate between moments of scepticism and optimism, between the power of system(s) and counter-agency respectively. As they do so, they create a more complete picture of the differing results apparent in contemporary political theatre practice.

Ostensibly, the pieces share distinct similarities. They all require a complicity from an audience, they are all political in theme, and share a performative core of participatory experience. However, whilst they may seem similar in form, they can be read as different in effect. Importantly, as the participatory offer becomes more radical and democratic, so too do the emancipatory effects begin to flourish. It is this very point that I believe holds much wider implications. With a heightened and direct involvement in contemporary politics, perhaps political emancipation could be achieved. In this vein, those who wish to seek tangible change in the political landscape would do well to learn of the accomplishments of work such as *Early Days*, specifically the way in which it involves its audience/citizens. Advancing this notion, Freshwater surmises that

Our sense of the proper, or ideal, relationship between theatre and its audiences can illuminate our hopes for other models of social interaction, clarifying our expectations of community, democracy, and

citizenship, and our perception of our roles and power (or lack of it) within the broader public sphere.¹

Ensuring meaningful participation could hypothetically cause change, it has democracy at its centre and seeks to disrupt the inevitability of capitalist society, even if this happens rarely. Like Brecht's *Lehrstücke* and Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, contemporary theatre can utilise modes of democracy and participation and produce work of an emancipatory nature. Beyond the nostalgia, there are still important facets of theatre history than can be reapplied to contemporary society, producing once again a theatre that could act as a venue for genuine public debate and dialogue where audiences could express themselves without inhibition and effect social change.² The theatre industry *needs* a theatre that can reinvent a contemporary participatory theatre to collude with the ambitions of political theatre. As Malzacher clarifies, this is

not only in order to avoid false participation, but also at the same time to re-appropriate the idea of genuine participation. A participation that

¹ Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, p. 3.

² Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, p.26.

can unfold its radical potential – in politics as in art. Real participation – this means relinquishing responsibility and power.³

I would argue that this false and transparent participation is what largely governs the contemporary participatory theatre repertoire. Participation that is wholly dictated and prescribed does nothing but validate the passivity of an audience. An audience becomes a conveyor belt of cultural consumers, titillated and distracted by commodified modes of experience yet mostly powerless to affect any degree of change in performance, never mind political consciousness. Instead of liberation, they receive coercion. Replacing agency is entrapment. Superseding substance is illusion. Rather than emancipation, they accept manipulation. Disguised under the façade of activity is passivity, one that reinforces the supremacy of the systems in control. In *Who Cares*, walking around the theatre building, conforming, does nothing to promote a genuine participatory theatre that can be said to emancipate its audience. Rachael Blyth notes on the work of the ‘big named’ immersive theatre companies that

³ Malzacher, *Unrest and Discontent – Political Theatre as Agonistic Field* (n.d).

what might feel like a unique, personalised experience is actually the opposite; whilst you are being shepherded around a venue in a small group, it might not be apparent that, thanks to multiple entry points, you are actually one of 600 audience members experiencing an ‘intimate’ production that evening.⁴

Instead, underneath the crafted guise lies a neatly packaged commodity, governed by the demands of the market, ready to be consumed by an audience. Whilst the participant in this case study may be physically active, their critical activity is nullified. They are just the latest example of the supremacy of capitalism via an experience.

In juxtaposition, *Early Days* provides an environment in which there is critical activity, freedom to create and model democracy, test and air issues, systems and struggles. Its format mirrors an approach by artist Thomas Hirschhorn, he notes that ‘To make art politically means to choose materials that do not intimidate, a format that doesn’t dominate, a device that does not seduce’,⁵ I would argue *Early Days* fits within this description. This case study may provide the starkest example of how, moreover, how *best* to tackle the problem of a form of art that is generally impotent in its approach to

⁴ Rachael Blyth, *The Fourth Wall and Other Ruins: Immersive Theatre as a Brand*, ed. by James Frieze, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 196.

⁵ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), p. 124.

combating dominant ideology in contemporary society. What is clear is that agency and emancipation is hard to produce, and similarly difficult to measure. *Early Days* may be, colloquially, the best of a bad situation.

Producing genuinely critical work was never going to be an easy task. Society is not constructed to allow attempts on power to be easily obtainable. The theatre establishment, whose primary concern is that of profitability, is not designed for the production of radical political performance. Whilst I remain optimistic that works of this type can gesticulate toward social change, I understand the value in the more sceptical counter-arguments that suggest otherwise. Further, as someone with a breadth of knowledge in work of this political nature, making bold statements about the effects of performance comes alongside an awareness of its risks. None of this necessarily amounts to emancipation, it only provides a good framework in which to explore it. Alongside this, the position of the artist or theatre maker contributes a strong ethical counter-argument. How can a truly democratic theatre exist whilst it depends upon the practicality of a (however free) pre-determined structure for participation? Even the most altruistic theatre makers still undermine a pure version of democracy, they are still all-knowing, still in control, still at the apex of the proceedings that take place.

As we traverse this tumultuous contemporary political epoch, I believe the theatre has a significant role to play. If nothing else, the recent events in world history seem to me like a fantastic piece of satire. Surely the theatre can do something to help people better understand the lunacy and hypocrisy of

such satirical times. Practically, before mounting an attack on the controlling system, the theatre establishment needs to realise its position firmly within the perimeters of a system constructed to inhibit any radical change rather than produce it. It is likely unable to topple the barricades, but instead a bit part player, a provocateur, a mere singular act of resistance within a colossal social structure. The systematic erosion of a counter-culture, in which examples of political theatre can be placed, has left the theatre unable to create social change. As Adam Curtis explains in his BBC documentary ‘Hypernormalisation’,

Even those who thought they were attacking the system, the radicals, the artists, the musicians and our whole counter-culture actually became part of the trickery... Which is why their opposition has no effect and nothing ever changes.⁶

Only through the careful and specific use of participatory political theatre can theatre makers begin to undermine capitalism using its very own products, enabling a counter-culture to garner genuine change.

⁶ Adam Curtis, ‘Hypernormalisation’, BBC iplayer, 16 October 2016 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p04b183c/adam-curtis-hypernormalisation>> [accessed 15 December 2016].

The potential power of participation in theatre should be a tool under consideration for those operating in the political sphere. Politicians who want to influence citizens would do well to note how carefully and democratically created participatory endeavours can create potentially emancipatory effects. So, what does this approach look like? I must at this moment input a disclaimer, I am no political strategist, but I do believe there is value in ensuring mass participation through organised structures of power firmly within the hands of the working people, and, I believe there may be a hidden value in apathy, perhaps even as an instigator to anarchy. In the spirit of utopian thinking against the grain of modern pragmatism, I look towards non-violent groups and events such as Occupy and the Arab Spring as examples of the political potential in participation. I believe the same methods can be explicated for participatory performance, a refusal of the system at hand, a demonstration of critique via ‘free’ acts of participation. This being said, I can now focus these on the three performances I have presented in this thesis. *Who Cares* is able to gather a large amount of audience members, and offer the same repeated performance without individual input, whilst inhibiting, this style could offer a way of providing experience on a large scale to a mass audience. Perhaps if people could choose their own journey, choose which position of argument on the left/right spectrum they wanted to hear, it would be more democratic in nature. What about a theatre piece that actually interviewed the selected ‘characters’ instead of just listening to them? *Fight Night* allows an audience to decide their own conclusions as they get the sense

of taking control over a system. This metaphor might be an important one, as ultimately emancipation may arise through control over a system even within the limitations it prescribes. However, what would be the results of the performance if an audience was permitted to choose/refute the system at hand at the very beginning of the performance? Couldn't this process of choosing a preferred candidate based on a number of issues be replicated on a larger scale for citizens to choose their representative for their local constituency? *Early Days*, in my opinion, is a good example of ensuring mass participation (I'm sure it could be replicated onto a larger scale). It does place the power within the hands of the working people on a fictional and literal level, and allows a genuine sense of self-discovery and self-emancipation. I would further that this model of experiential performance could be used practically, by asking the electorate to help design potential models of government, and co-author the politics which ultimately governs them. I wonder if we took an amalgam from around the UK of all different ages/sexes/professions/races etc. and asked them to do a similar realistic activity for actual politics, what the results would be? Specific to this thesis, *Early Days* may provide a model for politics more broadly, and holds the possibility for critical engagement. However, work that seeks to do what *Early Days* did not accomplish may look to use the idea of games, a perhaps more attractive prospect for younger citizens (the often unenthused sector or the electorate), and create a larger space (on the scale of Punchdrunk for example) for them to self-curate without the prescribed structure of narrative. Freedom to author a political experience

where the prize is not ‘winning’ but instead learning to understand how best to create and utilize change in an organic way is of value. Nonetheless, much like in theatre, a change in approach is required for those who want to usurp dominant political ideology, or else, participatory politics will always resemble an empty gesture rather than a genuinely active electorate. I’m reminded of the London march against the war in Iraq, two million people exhibiting their opposition, ultimately demonstrating that their participation had ostensibly little consequence. Further, the participatory act of marching into a poll booth to vote for a selection of candidates of whom none may be adequate is a worrying form of tacit compliance, validating the prescribed system with a tokenistic gesture of scribing an ‘X’ in a box. Participation, via non-participation may be a succinct gesture of disdain at current standards in both the commercial theatre circuit and contemporary politics. I’m aware this approach is not the best, but, just like *Early Days*, perhaps this is the best choice available in a bleak situation.

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